



Tim Ryan, US Chairman and Senior Partner



Art of Leading

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**"In These Moments, It's
Important For Leaders to Show
Their Human Side."**

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***Tim Ryan**, US Chairman and Senior Partner of PwC, recently shared his insights with me on leading through these challenging times. He also discussed the qualities he values the most in colleagues, and how he's opened up more conversations about diversity and inclusion at the firm.*

Q. How have you adjusted your leadership style in the crisis?

A. Once the crisis hit in earnest, my team and I started meeting every night, instead of the weekly cadence we had before. And we are now doing weekly meetings with our entire team of 55,000 people, instead of the usual twice-a-year, all-staff town halls. Our participation numbers are through the roof. We'll get anywhere from 35,000 and 45,000 people on the call every Wednesday.

As the leader, you want to tell people it's going to be okay, but at the same time maintain your credibility. I try to never to make a promise I can't keep. We talk first about the fact that their safety and their family's health are most important. In the early days, that was about travel restrictions and office closures. Now the conversations are shifting to the challenges of working remotely and the stresses of this crisis. It's starting to wear on people.

I closed a recent webcast by sharing with everyone that my family had

our blowup moment on the previous Friday night. I needed them to know that because we're all in that situation. In these moments, it's important for leaders to show their human side, and that you're not some Superman CEO. It was therapeutic to share, and it was therapeutic for our people to realize that "I'm not the only one." I probably got 300 emails from people sharing their own blowup moments.

Q. So much of leadership challenge now is around communicating, and balancing the tough realities while also inspiring confidence. How do you think about that?

A. I'm a big believer in something I learned from a mentor many years ago, which is that bad news doesn't age well. If you've got something bad to say, you should share it. What I've done with our people is to say, look, I'm going to share very openly what I know when I know it.

My last slide every week is that we're going to succeed because, number one, our people come first. Number two, we're focused on our clients and their needs. Number three, we will be calm and humbly confident. The last one is about focus and reminding people that we don't have to go it alone. And those words are very soothing and important. I've learned that calm and confident, but not overly optimistic, communication is important.

Q. Let's step back from the crisis. When you started in your role, you pulled together your leadership team. What are the qualities that matter most to you?

A. I'm looking for people who understand that we work for people. I don't believe we're at the top. We are here to serve and lead others. Another quality I look for is a thick skin, because leaders by definition can become out of touch. I was looking for a team that could really take feedback, as opposed to telling people why they were wrong. Leadership is about listening, and if enough employees tell me something, I probably need to fix it or act on it. The third one is I wanted people with a big tech acumen.

Q. And when you moved into the current role in 2016, was the reality of it different from what you expected, even in subtle ways?

A. Without a doubt, particularly around the number of stakeholders you have. There's clearly your people and your clients, but even within the company, there are different groups of people who have different needs. And realizing that I couldn't go deep on everything was a challenge for me, because going deep is my style.

I will also say that a big challenge for me early on was, how do I take all feedback but stay true to who I am? In my first week on the job, we woke up on a Friday morning to the shootings in Dallas in July 2016. I sent out an e-mail to our 55,000 people to simply say, "I know we're all feeling something here, let's get through it together." I got hundreds and hundreds of responses, and one said, "Thank you for the note. When I came to my office on Friday morning, the silence was deafening."

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idea that I'm not always going to please everybody."

I threw out the plan that I ran for the senior partner role on, and I spent a significant amount of my time over the next four weeks on diversity and inclusion. Three weeks later, we had our first-ever day-long discussion on race. We shut the firm down and we talked about race.

I got some blowback from some people at PwC who felt like I had overstepped my role as the CEO. I told them that I appreciated the feedback but encouraged them to go to one of our days of understanding. They came back to me and said, "I had no idea that some of our people felt this way," and then they were on board.

So for me, what I learned is that I have to follow my North Star about what I think is right. I don't intentionally make people mad, but I've come to grips with the idea that I'm not always going to please everybody, and that's okay.

Q. As a leader, how do you create the environment to have those conversations?

A. What started making these discussions more routine, and the message from the top down was that we're going to keep doing them. I've been in dozens of those conversations. I would start off by saying that this discussion is about respect, so I'm going to ask everybody to respect each other. Then I would simply ask, how do you honestly feel?

How do you feel when you come in to work every day? And you ask that of everyone. That simple question starts the conversation flowing. If you want to make progress, you've got to own the issue as the CEO. You can't delegate this.

Q. What were important early influences for you?

A. My mother and father were both blue-collar workers. I'm the first one in my family to complete college. My dad worked three jobs. His full-time job was as a Boston Edison utility worker. He also worked at the Boston Herald at night and as a garbage man. My mother was a supermarket worker. They taught me those things I mentioned earlier, about working hard, being honest and being respectful. Those have served me so well.

Q. And in your role now, I imagine you do a tremendous amount of mentoring. What's the most common piece of advice that you share?

A. I will often advise people that listening more is better than talking. I'll also say to people that while we want everybody to speak up, some things are better said in private, one on one, rather than in a larger group. Or maybe I'll counsel people about a better way to ask a question or challenge a colleague. A lot of my mentoring is about the EQ side of business, and how to create success and dynamics around people. How do you help make a team better?