



John Riccitiello, CEO of Unity Technologies



Art of Leading

Powerful insights from top leaders.

"You're Going to Have to Acknowledge the Personal Side of This Crisis."

Published on April 2, 2020



Adam Bryant [in](#)

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

[247 articles](#)

*I caught up recently with **John Riccitiello**, the CEO of **Unity***

***Technologies**, a gaming software company, to ask him how he's leading through this pandemic. He shared thoughtful insights about communication, and an important reminder that employees need to know their leaders are focused on running the business.*

Q. What's your approach to leadership during this crisis?

A. It starts with investing in the foundation of your culture, and that will allow you to have credibility to lead in a time like this. And there's a lot of components to that foundation. If you invest a lot in your people, they in turn can treat your customers really well. And if your customers are treated very well, you end up with a good P&L as long as you have a decent strategy.

The second thing we talk a lot about at Unity is that it can be easy for executive team to get wrapped up with ego. But when I'm with my team, I remind them that we don't code for Unity anymore. We don't sell; we meet customers, but somebody else teed up that meeting. We don't really do anything other than build great teams. That's the entirety of our job — to build teams and to ensure that they've got the tools they need to be successful. And once you understand that you're a conveyance and not there to execute other people's work, you can approach a problem in the right way.

*"That's the entirety of our job
— to build teams."*

A key pillar for us is our four values. The first two are about being bold and putting customers first. The third is “best ideas win,” and we train people in the art of active listening and to have a mindset of looking for the best idea, not looking to sell your idea. We celebrate when frontline individual contributors have created an idea that moves the company ahead, often because their idea trumped the idea of the CEO or a senior executive.

Our fourth value is “in it together.” We’ve been a geo-diverse company for a long time. We’ve got major R&D centers in Singapore, Shanghai, Beijing, Tokyo, Seoul, Stockholm, Amsterdam, Berlin, Copenhagen, Montreal, Seattle, San Francisco and Brighton. But even with all those different offices, you hear people talking many times a day about having each other’s backs.

Q. How are you approaching communication at times like this, both in terms of cadence and tone?

A. I was doing monthly town halls; we’re doing them weekly now. I was doing biweekly exec meetings; we’re doing them twice a week now. Every team in the company is doing weekly and daily stand-ups. And bad news is important to share at times like this. Our business happens to be faring very well in this environment, but not every bit of our business is easy, and it’s super-important that you don’t lose credibility by trying to put a shiny surface on the bad parts. You lose credibility the minute you don’t actually work in a credible way.

It’s an interesting balance. At one level, I want people to put their

health and their family first. I tell everybody to also make dispensation for the people on your team. There might be single parents at home and they've got three kids bopping around who used to be in school. They're going to have a hard time, so make room for who they are. Make room for those who can't quite contribute like they did before.

On the other hand, every one of our employees has the majority of their net worth in our stock. It's important for them to know that we're strong, that they have a great job while this is happening and they will have a great job when this is over. But they need to see the blemishes too, so they have to believe what you're saying.

*"It's easy to get swallowed up
by the idea that everything is
only about corona."*

In our virtual town halls, I'll talk about the coronavirus. But I'll also talk in some detail about what's going on with the business. This is our operating plan, here's what our metrics are, this is how we're doing, here's what our priorities are. It's easy to get swallowed up by the idea that everything is only about corona. I think my colleagues find it heartening that someone's running the company in a calm and collected way. They might like you personally, but they are relying on you to eat and for healthcare, and they want to know that someone's working full-time on that.

Q. How do you make your teams operate like real teams? Because

it is not necessarily a natural muscle for a lot of people, and they can default to playing politics.

A. We talk very openly about what the agenda is and what we're trying to accomplish. And we take the time to define what politics means because it's such a generic term. We define politics as an agenda other than that which is right for the company. Are we doing anything that's about advancing our own personal interest or someone else's personal interest? Is there some other discernible agenda?

We spend a lot of time driving for alignment by getting clear about the problem we're trying to solve. We're constantly reframing the problem to get closer to a crisp definition of what that is.

Q. With everybody working from home, the human connections are becoming more important than ever. How do you think about that?

A. It's important at times like this, especially since one of our values is "in it together," that you reveal more about yourself in authentic ways. People shouldn't change their spots to do this, but if it's in your quiver of capability, then look for those moments. You're going to have to acknowledge the personal side of this crisis because it's the right thing to do and we're all human.

You've got to give people permission to be human and to recognize the foibles that will come with times like this. I had an executive meeting the other day, and the screen went crazy because one of my colleagues'

cats ran over his keyboard. You've got to create room for all that, and if you can show your personal side as an executive team, people appreciate it. But I don't think they'll appreciate it if it plays hollow because they've never seen it before. And again, remember that the main thing they're looking to you for is to run the business.