

# "Leadership Is About Helping People See That The World Is A Bigger Opportunity."

Published on June 1, 2020

---



**Adam Bryant** [in](#)

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

---

*I first interviewed **Bill McDermott** seven years ago, when he was running SAP, and I was eager to catch up with him after he took over the top job at ServiceNow last fall. Tons of wisdom in this interview, including a powerful team-building exercise.*

**Q. The pandemic hit not long after you joined ServiceNow from SAP last October. What lessons did you draw on for leading in this crisis?**

A. Shortly after I joined the company, we put together a plan called “Dream Big” with five main priorities that have been shared with every

employee around the world. Because that foundation was firmly in place before we were challenged by this crisis, everybody had a good understanding of the plan. The key to leading through this has been to acknowledge the difficulty of the situation, but to encourage everyone to be part of the solution.

A crisis also forces you to reflect on big-picture questions, such as, “What are we? Who are we? What are we really good at?” Don’t focus in a crisis on all the things that you need to figure out. Focus on the things that you know you’re really good at, and amplify, illuminate and drive those.

We can’t control so many things that are going on, so it’s important to remind people to focus on what they can control, because the distractions will take you nowhere. It’s about reminding people that this is what we can do — protect this house, and then take good care of our customers. It’s that simple.

**Q. What do you see as the key balancing acts of communicating during a crisis?**

A. Everything worth communicating is almost always under-communicated, and in a crisis, the over-communication has to be on maximum strength. Don’t assume that you’ve said it enough times. Until you really over-communicate the message so that people are nodding in complete understanding, you haven’t gotten the message through.

I believe that too many leaders spend too much time with thoughts in their own mind, including their fears. You have to just share them with people and put your trust in their hands because they can do a lot.

**Q. I find that many leaders struggle with how open and vulnerable they should be with their teams.**

A. Over time, you grow more comfortable just being yourself and not trying to put filters on things and not trying to overthink things. The idea is just to be transparent and let people know how you're feeling, what your thoughts are, what you're thinking about, and how you wrestle with decisions.

*"You have to treat people like adults."*

The main thing is to just be authentic. People know, after they've had enough interactions with you, if they're getting the real thing. You have to treat people like adults. The idea of treating them like you're the schoolteacher and you've got to filter what they can and cannot hear is ridiculous.

They want to hear it all, but they expect to hear it in a way where you've tailored your thoughts in a concise way so they can understand it and then do something with it. So I do put some thought into the question, "How can I make this very complex situation extremely simple, easy to understand, and actionable?" Don't give them a mess.

Clean it up before you give them anything.

**Q. What are the leadership qualities that will carry a greater premium long-term?**

A. Leadership in general is the premium. Leadership is about helping people see that the world is a bigger opportunity than they thought before they met you. Some people manage that well through process, discipline, and all the techniques of leadership. Other people can paint a dream and let other people take it from there.

You need to create a plan with tremendous ambition, and then you stick to the plan. I say what I mean; I mean what I say. We're still on the same sheet of music we were on the day we composed this plan with great care. That way, people always know where you stand.

*"Leaders in this era are best defined by humility."*

I also believe that leaders in this era are best defined by humility. A crisis like this reminds you that everybody is human, and we're all going to have our trials and tribulations. But the thing that you will most be remembered for is, did you get up when you got knocked down? Are you a fighter? Do you want to win? You've got to get back to what matters to you so you can be authentic in moments like this and know that you're fighting for something worth fighting for.

**Q. How do you make sure your leadership teams are acting like teams?**

A. The way I keep score is not so much about who gets credit for doing the most or who gets credit for any given task. Ultimately the real credit belongs to the person who is the biggest giver, the most generous, and the one who is most likely to help their teammate get off the mat when they're down or help them do their job. None of us is as smart as all of us, and we've got to stick together.

You also have to be honest and open and provide feedback. Let me share an example: We organized a leadership team offsite at my former company, and we needed that time together because there were some dynamics on the team that had to be worked out.

*"By the end of the offsite, I had  
a totally different team."*

Sometimes people have a hard time giving each other true feedback, so we used what I call the walk-around process. Each person on the team went for a one-on-one walk with another person on the team, and we organized the pairs so that everybody would have a walk with every other person on the team.

The exercise was simple — tell the person three things that you deeply admire about them, and tell them the three things that you think they could most benefit from, in terms of constructive feedback. At the end

of that exercise, everybody became much closer because all the elephants had been put on the table. By the end of the offsite, I had a totally different team.

**Q: How have you evolved as a leader in the seven years since our last conversation?**

A: Overcoming a life-threatening injury in 2015 gave me great clarity [McDermott slipped on stairs while holding a glass of water at his brother's home, and lost an eye when he fell on the broken glass and briefly lost consciousness]. It's certainly not something that I would have volunteered for, but I really believe it was a destiny moment, because in a billion years you never could have recreated that accident.

People often ask me, "What's different since the accident?" I tell them vision is not just what you see, it's what you feel, and it's what you make other people feel. I've become clearer about the way I look at the world, and I want to give the best I've got to other people. I think that's the art of leadership. It's just giving the best you've got to other people so they can be the best they can be.