



Paul Kenward, Managing Director of British Sugar, with beets that his company processes into sugar



Art of Leading

Powerful insights from top leaders.

"You Have To Honor What Happened Before You Stepped Into Your Role."

Published on June 11, 2020



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*In our interview, **Paul Kenward**, managing director of British Sugar, shared powerful reminders about the importance of storytelling, and a smart strategy for encouraging employees to share candid feedback about areas for improvement.*

Q. I'm intrigued by your background. How did you go from running your own tailoring business to leading a sugar-manufacturing business?

A. Like many people, I've never really had a career plan beyond wanting to do things that were challenging and interesting. I studied history at university, then went to a strategy consultancy because I wanted to be involved in C-suite decisions. I then went to work for EMI Records, but I'd always wanted to do something entrepreneurial.

I had the very obvious insight that I was unlikely to create the next Google or anything like that. I wanted to set up a consumer business that didn't need much capital at first, and tailoring actually worked really well. The skill of measuring somebody for suits is not that difficult, and the cash flow is fantastic, because I would get 50 percent of the money up front.

When it came time to do something new, the recruitment consultants were a bit puzzled about where they could try to place me. But ABF (Associated British Foods) needed someone in their central strategy team who also had entrepreneurial experience to possibly lead one of their businesses in the future.

Q. Your title is Managing Director, but that title in a British company is similar to being a CEO in the United States. Was the role different than what you expected in any way?

A. I've really come to appreciate the importance of storytelling. Yes, you have to have a clear strategy, but you then need to be able to communicate it in ways that have emotional hooks and a clear beginning, middle and end.

That said, you can have great processes and products, but if you don't have the right people, you'll be in trouble. It's not a new insight, but I continue to coach my people that I will hold them and their teams to account for delivery – so they'd better have a great team. Someone advised me early on that if you think someone is not quite good enough, you should act on your doubts. By all means coach them and help them try to improve, but if it's not working, you should make a change.

Q. Can you elaborate on your insight about the importance of storytelling?

A. For years, I relied heavily on PowerPoint. You'd have all the charts, but I was losing part of the audience in those kinds of presentations. So I started using it less, which forces you to think more about the narrative and the story.

The skill of being able to cut through complexity and create a compelling rallying cry is increasingly rare. I meet smart people who

seem determined to show you how smart they are by burying you with complicated PowerPoints. Being able to take a complex business like ours and boil it down to simple terms about this amazing beet that we turn into sugar is compelling. People understand it.

"The skill of being able to cut through complexity and create a compelling rallying cry is increasingly rare."

One trap I've seen leaders fall into is that they use the day they started at the company as the beginning of the stories they tell. You have to honor what happened before you stepped into your role, and you have to understand the reasons why smart people did things that may now look questionable, because they made those decisions in a different environment.

I've learned that if you tell a story that starts by honoring the past and makes clear that a pivot point has happened or is going to happen, then you build a case for urgent change. But you also have to paint a picture of a shining city on a hill, of a quest, and describe what success will look like and feel like.

Q. Here in the United States, leaders talk a lot about the “purpose” of their companies. How do you do that for a commodity business?

A. Brits can be quite cynical about “visions,” dismissing them as fluffy,

airy things. But I think they can be really important. We say that what we're trying to do is be at the heart of a thriving, homegrown sugar industry. Every word is chosen with care, but they only come alive when you can talk about them.

For example, we have engineers who started here 40 years ago as apprentices. They are homegrown talent. The whole crop is homegrown; we don't import anything. People want to feel that they are doing something that is socially worthwhile and has a broader purpose, and our sustainability story is increasingly important to our organization.

Our sugar only travels an average of 28 miles from the sugar beet fields to our factories. For every ton of sugar we produce, we only waste 200 grams, or about seven ounces, of matter. Every part of the beet is used. We've reduced our water and energy consumption by around 20 percent over the last five years. These things really matter.

Q. One of the biggest challenges that leaders face is maintaining a fingertip feel for what people at all levels of the company are thinking.

A. I make time in my schedule to visit our factories. But it's not enough to just go to the factory floor and ask people, "What's going on?" They'll tell you everything is fine because you're the MD and they don't want to make their direct bosses look bad.

So I use certain tools, and there is one in particular that I've found to be

effective. If I sit in a room with 30 people and just ask them what I should fix, they won't tell me. So instead I ask them, "What makes you proud to be part of British Sugar? Work in pairs to write down a few ideas, and then we'll talk about the things you've achieved over the last five years that you're really proud of."

*"People need to feel that they
have made progress."*

We'll have that discussion, and then I'll say to them, "Now just imagine you're five years in the future. What are we proud of now? What would you really have loved to have achieved over the next five years for the business to have changed?" It's just so much easier for people to talk positively about what can and should be changed.

It ties back to honoring the past. People need to feel that they have made progress. It's difficult enough to make change happen. If you don't remind people that they were able to change things already, people give up before they've started. And most organizations have changed quite a lot of things. You just have to help people remember that.

Q. What were early influences for you?

A. I've always read voraciously. I have early memories of me being under the bedcovers, using a flashlight to read novels. And I've always found learning interesting. I loved being at school and I was very nerdy.

University was formative for me, though, because that's when I gained a lot more confidence.

At Oxford, I eventually became President of the Oxford Union, the debating society. But the first time I was supposed to debate, I was almost too scared to stand up and speak. The hall we were in dates back to 1878, and it's a very intimidating place. But once I got up and spoke and nothing bad happened, I realized how much I enjoyed an audience. I still do.