



Jimmy Etheredge



Art of Leading

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'There Is Too Much Silence Around Things That People Feel Awkward Talking About.'

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Adam Bryant [in](#)

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

*It's human nature to want to avoid difficult conversations, particularly about sensitive topics like racism. But **Jimmy Etheredge**, Accenture's CEO of North America, said in our interview that it's long been his approach not to shy away from challenging discussions. Tons of insights here on vulnerability and teams, as well.*

Q. You're about to hit your one-year anniversary as a CEO. Quite a first year.

A. It's been intense, for sure. There's so much change and I'm making constant shifts to help our people stay safe and our business stay strong. In March, we had just launched a new growth model, the largest organizational change we've had in 15 years. Then the pandemic hit, followed by a heightened awareness of systemic racism in America.

Q. So what's your playbook for leading at a time like this, when there is so much uncertainty?

A. I've been in a number of difficult, complicated situations over the course of my career and I've always found it's best to try to be as transparent as possible and to be comfortable saying, "I don't have all the answers." I've always been comfortable being vulnerable, and so I've leaned into trying to communicate as frequently as I can, to be very transparent and to tell people that I may not have the answers but that I will share them when I have them.

Q. A lot of leaders struggle with the idea of showing vulnerability.

A. When you're focusing on growth and innovation, you have to take risks. If you're taking risks, you're going to fail some of the time. This is a conversation I have a lot with my leaders. In fact, when I'm looking to put someone into a new role or to build out my leadership team, it's a standard question I usually ask: "Tell me about when you've taken a risk and failed. What's the biggest one you can think of?"

What I'm interested to understand is someone's appetite for risk, but I'm also interested in whether and how they ask for help. There was a time in my career at Accenture when I helped fix a couple of big problems with our clients, and the CEO at the time, Bill Green, decided to make me the number-one client problem-solver.

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The pattern I noticed was that people were not comfortable being vulnerable about the fact that they're making mistakes. So I would encounter these teams that were just exhausted. They had worked themselves to the bone trying to solve a problem that they couldn't solve, trying to do it on their own. By the time they raised their hand, it was too late to have a larger set of solutions that you could choose from to fix the problem.

So it really shaped my view when I was building teams that I want people who take risks, because I don't know how to innovate and grow without taking risks; who have failed, because I don't know how to truly take risks without failing some of the time; and who are really comfortable asking for help. It's crazy to think that with all the talent that we have that you feel like you have to solve everything yourself when you get into trouble.

Q. As companies start to look more to life beyond coronavirus, what are your reflections on what leaders have learned during this crisis?

A. The good news is that there's been three years' worth of digital transformation in the last three months. When you're in a crisis and you need to make decisions quickly and you need to execute, you're a lot more capable of doing those things than perhaps you thought you were before. That has clients really thinking about, "How do I maintain that same speed as we start to move to this next phase?"

The bad news is that a lot of that speed has come from crisis adrenaline, and you can only run a business off of adrenaline for so long. I have a lot of passion around mental health, in part because I have been exposed firsthand in my family to mental health issues. We have a lot of people who are dealing with stress and anxiety and depression right now.

In this environment of being constantly on, with video calls 12 hours a day, without much time to unplug, and then you throw in the issue of

parents homeschooling their kids, there are a lot of mental health challenges right now. So you can't just take some of the success that clients are excited about and extrapolate it. We've learned that maybe we don't need 12 people to make a decision anymore, but we also have to get a place where there is more balance for people around their mental health.

Q. How are you leading conversations during this moment of intense focus of racism in our society?

A. Since I took over this role, I've been talking about the four things that I think are most important for our people, which is to feel safe, to feel seen, to feel connected, and to feel courageous. But those ideas have become more important in light of what's happened. Part of feeling safe and seen means that people believe that they can share what they are feeling and thinking and that their voices are heard.

I had been really pushing this agenda of checking in with each other because of all the anxiety and stress about COVID, but then we could see immediately the difficulty that our Black employees were having with all that was going on and how we needed to make space and grace for that. And anyone who feels that humanity is important is going to be deeply affected by what's happened.

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I shared my perspective about how what is going on in society directly contradicts my values and Accenture's values. In addition, I immediately reached out to talk to a lot of our African-American leaders. We've tried to do a lot of town halls, but my view is that the larger the town hall, the less interactive it's going to be. So I worked with my leadership team to really connect with many small gatherings.

And we've started to focus on the actions we're going to take. I'm a big believer in crowdsourcing as a great way to not only come up with more creative answers from diverse voices that are part of the solution process, but also to create more ownership for those solutions. I don't want to be like Moses coming down the mountain with two tablets saying, "Okay, here's what we're going to do to fix the problem."

The concepts of inclusiveness, authenticity, letting people bring their best self to work every day and respect for the individual are really important to me. And the other one is integrity, and I often tell people that the most productive thing I know how to do with clients is have awkward conversations. You can't have enough awkward conversations. For a lot of our people, that feels very uncomfortable.

When I was in that problem-solver role I mentioned, the first thing I would say to the client is, "Let's just get right to the things that are really bothering you the most. How has this become personal for you?" Because once I can get those out on the table, then I can do something about them. It helps to have those awkward conversations.

"It's never too late to do the right thing."

That's one of the things that I have leaned on here, in terms of talking about these societal challenges through that integrity lens. How do you have these awkward conversations? There is too much silence around things that people feel awkward talking about. I've made this point in one of our town halls: It's never too late to do the right thing.

Q. What in your background made you comfortable having those tough conversations?

A. The honest answer is that I don't know. I came from a very small town in rural Georgia — no stoplights, just a railroad track. I've always had a certain degree of humility around other people. I love learning things, and I never felt like I had to dominate the discussion or to be the smartest person in the room. If I'm the smartest person in the room and I'm doing most of the talking, I'm not learning anything.

Q. What's it like to work for you? What are Jimmy's do's and don'ts?

A. One is around being present. I am a reformed multitasker. You've got to be present in meetings. A second is that I am the eternal glass-half-full problem-solver. I need people to tell me how something can be done, not why it can't be done.

The third thing that I have emphasized is that I am all about collaboration. Sports analogies don't work with everybody, but if you're someone who pays attention to sports, I've always felt like my leadership style is more like an NBA coach than an NFL coach.

In the NBA, the players are big personalities and the coaches are not famous. Half of their time is really spent trying to figure out how to get these egos to play well with each other. NFL coaches are often more about dictating what people should do and telling them, "Do your job." I'm okay with different personalities and egos, but it has to be in that team concept.