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# "You Need The Strength Of Character To Have Honest Conversations."

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*In our interview, **Parm Sandhu**, one of our **Merryck & Co.** mentors, shared smart insights about building constructive*

*relationships with colleagues and why leaders should be more concerned with being respected than liked.*

**Q. What are the most common themes that come up when you're advising senior executives?**

A. The themes that tend to come up are usually related to the executives' perspective and awareness of their environment. What often causes issues for them are their relationships. It's less about their business competence or strategic direction. And it can be any relationship. It's a question of having them reframe and think about what their blind spots may be and how they can better handle those relationships.

They might be locked into a certain way of thinking and behaving with a person, and so the relationship is stagnating. Approaching the communication around that relationship in a different way tends to unlock different parts of it.

**Q. What about challenges that people are having with their boss?**

A. It's usually because they're not feeling valued for what they're contributing. One way to address that is to get them to think more about their boss's frame of reference. I was working with one executive who had a very difficult boss, particularly after he would come across all kinds of problems on the company's consumer website.

I suggested to my client that his boss may have been acting in that way

because he passionately believed in putting the customer first. He was looking at the organization through the eyes of a customer, and my client needed to start doing that, as well. His boss wasn't beating him up just for the sake of giving him a hard time.

**Q. What themes come up in terms of managing a team of direct reports?**

A. The biggest is clarity of communication and whether they are being direct and open enough with their teams. You need the strength of character to have honest conversations. Whenever it's avoided, it becomes a problem. And having the conversations always pays off. There's never a downside to it.

**Q. A lot of people are uncomfortable having those conversations.**

A. I've tended not to have that issue myself. Partly it's a personality trait. I studied math in university, and I naturally view things unemotionally and analytically. A lot of CEOs make the mistake of wanting to be liked as opposed to being respected.

I also had a formative experience early on in my career. I was 29, and I was the chief of staff for a CEO. He was quite inspirational as a visionary, but he was ineffective as a CEO. He just wanted to be liked. He could never take the tough decisions.

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*of wanting to be liked as  
opposed to being respected.*

As the leader, it's your responsibility to take the decisions. After watching him struggle, I tried never to make that mistake myself. He also lacked attention to detail, which is incredibly important because you have to set the standard. It's the bar by which everyone's work is judged.

**Q. What have been other big lessons for you?**

A. You have to have a zest for life. There are so many different roles within a CEO's role, and you have to be able to pivot between them quickly. So you've got to have an intense ability to absorb information, but you also need to have creativity. You need to be able to think through issues differently, and come up with new approaches. There has to be innovation, and you've got to give yourself the time and the right environment for that. If you don't do that, you're just lost.

As a CEO, you're making decisions all the time, and 90 percent of them are fine. But sometimes something just doesn't sit well. I've learned not to force those decisions, even though the organization may have been screaming out for direction. Eventually the right answer would come, and it would be clear. Maybe it's the subconscious processing. But you've got to give things time and you've got to learn that aspect of self-management.

## *You've got to give things time.*

You also have to strike a balance between giving people one-on-one time and working together as a team. There's a lot that has to happen in a team context, but you can never lose sight of the fact that you need to look after people on an individual basis. They crave stimulation, and you've got to constantly be adding to their responsibilities or moving them around.

I really enjoyed putting people into roles that they wouldn't have thought of themselves. Sometimes they would doubt themselves but you could see they had the ability to do it. It also established a certain level of creative dissonance. You need to create that and it's your role to catalyze this by putting people in the right roles and keeping them constantly stimulated.

**Q. You've achieved a lot of success in your life. What were important early influences for you?**

A. I'm the eldest child in my family, and so always felt a strong sense of responsibility and maybe it made me strive early on to differentiate myself. In my early teens, I got into trouble, but once I turned 14, I shifted my focus to studying. I just started applying myself, and the more I did it, the more I enjoyed it. I was the first person in the history of my inner-city state school in Birmingham to go to Cambridge University. I learned that nothing's going to come to you and land in your lap unless you go out and make it happen.