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Leaders Have To Balance Courage And Confidence With Compassion

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Tami Erwin, CEO of Verizon Business, shared key leadership insights in my latest "Art of Leading" interview. [Subscribe here](#) to receive future interviews.

Q. What are the key leadership muscles you've built over the last couple of years?

A. In this environment, you are never going to have all the facts, and so you make decisions that are right in the moment while also allowing for experimentation throughout the organization. You have to lead everyone to a common and clear objective with urgency, and without a lot of worry about who is making what decisions. As long as you have clarity on the mission and urgency, everybody can move forward together. That's a lesson that will be a core tenet of how every leader manages in these uncertain times.

Q. What is it about your background that prepared you for this moment when you are facing new leadership challenges every day?

A. I don't know that you're ever fully prepared, but I grew up in an agricultural community north of Seattle. My father was a physician, but he also really wanted to be a farmer, so we did both. I learned about compassion working in my father's family practice in the summers. But I also picked strawberries and learned to compete — the faster you worked, the more you earned. So at an early age, I learned a balance of compassion and competitiveness.

Q. What have been key leadership lessons you've learned in your

career?

A. One important principle I've learned over the years is the gift of feedback to employees. I've become much more candid about how I approach that with my team because otherwise I'm failing them. If they don't understand what's holding them back, if I don't have the courage to say here's a thing that you've got to demonstrate improvement on, they will never reach their peak performance. I've learned that people are capable of performing at a much higher level than they ever thought possible, and it's part of my responsibility to provide that coaching.

Q. Leadership is a series of tricky balancing acts. Which ones are top of mind for you these days?

A. The ability to have courage and confidence while also having compassion is really important right now. You have to make difficult decisions, be confident in the path you're moving along, and yet have compassion for the fact that the decision that you're making with courage and confidence may have bad outcomes for other people. You have to deliver those messages in a way that's compassionate and recognizes the human component.

And there's an interesting and emerging trend of leaders taking a position on some social issues. How do you do that in a way that avoids the polarization that the world is experiencing right now? Remaining silent on some of those social issues doesn't feel like the right thing, and yet to polarize your customer or employee base and be in a position where you're only leading half the population isn't right, either. So you

have to figure out how to have a voice for action and urgency around some of these social issues without necessarily taking a side.

Q. And so what's your advice to other leaders on how to navigate this tricky time?

A. There are some obvious positions to take. After the murder of George Floyd, we all agreed that respect for human life and treating people with dignity and respect, regardless of their race or gender, is a minimum basic requirement, and that we can't allow such tragedies to occur. I am also a big supporter of the public sector and our police, and I have a tremendous amount of confidence in them and appreciation for the job we ask them to do.

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But there are foundational principles of gender and race equality that you can stand for. We have a set of values at Verizon that are fundamental — integrity, respect, performance, excellence, accountability, and social responsibility — and we can usually anchor our position on these core societal issues back to those values, and then people can have some choices about how they want to talk about the issues.

Q. What are the X factors you're looking for in your current and future leaders?

A. Early in your career, your X factor is your ability to deliver results, based on your individual technical capabilities that stand out from your peers. As you move into more senior roles, you have to be aware of the social and political environments in which you're operating. You have to understand the overall objective of the business, and you have to want to win on behalf of the team and not just yourself.

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I've learned over the years that your most important stakeholders in your career are your peers. It's not your boss. Your boss is important, and you need to understand their expectations, but it's your peer group that will determine whether you accelerate in your career, because people want to work with somebody they trust. They want to work with somebody who keeps their commitments and delivers on what they said they would do. They want to work with somebody who's got good communication skills, and they want to work with somebody who is most concerned about the success of the team. So when I look at people who stand out, they understand their business, they can come up with innovative and transformative strategies, and they can bring people along on that journey.

Q. That insight about peer relationships is so important. How did you learn that?

A. Earlier in my career, my focus was on my team and my boss, but I was unaware that my stakeholder group was so important to help my team be successful. But then a boss of mine gave me some blunt feedback. He said, “Tami, people don’t like to work with you.” I was surprised and asked him what he meant. “Your peers don’t like to work with you because you’re so competitive. You don’t always have to be right. Why don’t you listen to other people’s ideas, let them have a voice, and then you can get everyone aligned at the end of the meeting?”

That led to a small but important pivot in my style. My intentions were good, but they were misconstrued as being highly competitive, and not wanting others to be successful. I learned that leadership is about being intentionally purposeful about what and when and where you have a voice. You can’t have a voice on everything. That lesson helped change the trajectory of my career.

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