



Leading Through Disruption

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Asking For Help Is A Great Strength. A Lot Of People Don't Find It Easy To Do.

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Christine Elliott, a veteran business leader and board director, shared key leadership lessons with my colleague Adam Bryant, managing director of The ExCo Group, and me in our latest "Leading Through Disruption" interview. Subscribe [here](#) to receive future interviews.

Lauterbach: What were some early leadership lessons for you?

Elliott: When I was in my first chief executive role, I found that suddenly everybody was deferring everything to me. My inbox was overflowing. It was the same situation every night. I'd try to clear my inbox and give people the answers that they needed so we could start the next day on the right foot.

As I reflected more about all the incoming issues, I found that I could divide them into three piles and respond to them accordingly, so much so that I had these little stamps made. One was, "I like this." The second was, "How can this be improved?" The third one was, "It's your decision." With those I was able to clear my inbox much faster.

Another lesson is that the main challenges are always about people. And when you first become a leader, you may not be conscious of this, but people pay so much attention to what your mood is and what you do. What are your values? What tone do you set? Is your behavior consistent with those values?

If you're in a really senior position, you have such a massive impact on people's lives and their well-being. You need to approach leadership with great care and sensitivity, while being conscious that you're serving a number of agendas. Personal values and behaviors are key for setting the tone for the organization and how people are going to behave. If they don't see things in their leadership that they want to emulate, then why should you have expectations that people will behave differently from you?

Bryant: That requires a high degree of self-awareness.

Elliott: As a leader, you need to be self-disciplined and very organized. There are all sorts of different styles of leadership, but at the core of it is always values and behaviors and a willingness to be transparent, to be accountable and to think to yourself: Where does change start? It starts with me. What have I done to change? What can I do to contribute? Am I aware of the impact this will have on other people? How do I mitigate it? What's my part? What's the role of the board that I chair or the senior leadership team?

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If you've got the courage to reflect on your own strengths and weaknesses and motivations, then you can deal with anything that you've got in front of you now. But you must be unafraid to ask for

help. Asking for help is a great strength, and a lot of people don't find it easy to do. They think that's a weakness, but it's not at all. There is greater importance for collaboration within companies and between companies

Lauterbach: Other key leadership lessons for you?

Elliott: It is absolutely necessary to include and bring along everyone in your organization, especially people without big titles. They are the people who do things that keep the organization going but very rarely get the recognition that they deserve. Be thoughtful and really kind in what you do. You may have to make difficult decisions, but you must always execute those decisions with great kindness and consideration.

At other times in my career, I've seen some executives not give a second thought to destroying people's self-confidence and their careers. You should always try and leave people intact with some clarity about their next steps.

I also learned the importance of mastering the numbers in whatever you do, and that includes all data points, not just financial ones. When I was at the Institute for Turnaround (IFT), I will never forget my first board meeting there as the new chief executive. I thought I had thought through everything. Then the board started asking questions about the finances. They were so forensic.

After that, I realized that people absorb information in very different ways. So I got a lot stronger at mastering all the data. And that really

gave me a nose for trouble, which someone who works in transformation needs, because you need to be able to identify the warning signs early on. You get warnings through the data. You get warnings through the people. There are lots of warning signs from all parts of the organization, but you'll only pick up on them if you are open to them.

Bryant: As a board chair, how do you make sure the entire board operates as a team?

Elliott: You have to unite people in a common purpose, so you have to bring them together and collectively commit to the one defining idea of the organization. Why does this organization deserve to exist? So I start with that: "Have we all agreed on this key principle?" And if we haven't, then we need to get there to join people in a shared sense of purpose for the organization.

How do you do that? It's all through building relationships, and those need to be one-to-one. The chair needs to take the time to understand the background, the capabilities, the character, and the drive of each board member and what they can contribute. Then it's a bit like the most wonderful human puzzle. How do you interlock all their talents? How do you connect that talent with the parts of the organization that need their input, and then bring all that together to make sure that the objectives are delivered?

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teamwork and bonding on the board requires work.

Building that sense of teamwork and bonding on the board requires work. It has to be deliberate. If you're relying on it happening by accident, it will be too slow. If you want a board to work together, you have to give them the opportunity to get together, whether in person or virtually. The boards that I've chaired during Covid, surprisingly, have learned more about one another, because we've met more frequently, even though the meetings have become shorter. We have much more efficient ways of dealing with routine business, which I'm pleased to say that we've now carried into our in-person meetings, as well.

Another point about building a sense of teamwork on the board: You've got to engage them with an exciting agenda, so that they're not just turning up for the paycheck. You want to draw on all their experience and wisdom, but you're asking them for more by giving them new challenges. And that can include being involved in discussions to develop frameworks for values and behaviors. This is of course a broader discussion that should be led by the leadership team. But the board can also ask questions to help lead those discussions.

What are the values of the organization now? Are these the ones that we want to have for the future? Is this really us or do we want to be something different? Are we being realistic in our aspirations? If transparency is one of the values, then how do we put that into practice? What are three observable behaviors that show that we are

putting our values into practice? You've got to give people something they can refer to, and it can't be a great tome. It's got to be something that anybody can work with.

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