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Leaders Should Always Be Cultivating The Critical Skill of Self-Awareness

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Constantine Alexandrakis



Adam Bryant [in](#)

Senior Managing Director at The ExCo Group

Constantine Alexandrakis, CEO of Russell Reynolds Associates, shared key leadership insights in my latest "Art of Leading" interview. Subscribe [here](#) to receive future interviews.

Q: What were important early influences that really shaped who you are as a leader today?

A: I grew up in Miami, and my parents were both college professors, so education was a big part of our family. In high school, I gravitated to leadership roles such as editor of the school paper. But academia was never interesting to me, so I disappointed my parents early on.

I studied economics in college and then went to law school and business school. But the common theme for me is that I always enjoyed working with others to set the direction, to figure out how to solve problems, and to make something better than it was before.

Q: What is it about your background that prepared you for leading in this environment of ambiguity and disruption?

A: I never practiced as a lawyer, but my legal training taught me how to filter out the noise and zero in on the key elements and how to solve them. The mentors I've had also taught me how to push to the next level and into the unknown to figure out new opportunities that we may be missing.

Q: You've spent a lot of time advising CEOs, and stepped into your

first CEO role in January. Was there any aspect of the job that surprised you?

A: What surprised me the most is that the role is a lot more ambiguous than I had envisioned. I don't know if that's specific to our business or this moment in history. But there's an inherent ambiguity in the role that is an advantage, because it gives the CEO the opportunity to really shape where they spend their time, where they want the organization to spend its time, and then pivot between those priorities.

Q: Key leadership lessons you've learned in your career?

A: One of the ways my career evolved, both as a management consultant and as a leader, was around wanting to drive to perfection at times. The reality is that that approach just doesn't work. A colleague I worked with about 10 years ago always hammered into me the notion of managing toward the bell curve.

There are going to be some outliers on either side and there's a hump in the middle, and you need to be managing toward that middle and satisfying the majority of the people or tackling the majority of the agenda items. That has always helped me let go of my inner perfectionist and become a more practical, and hopefully more successful, leader.

Q: What are the three or four X factors that really separate the best leaders today?

A: Being a good listener is fundamental for any leader. Self-awareness, which is elusive and more difficult than it seems, is an extremely critical skill for all leaders to be continuously cultivating. And in this environment, you need a willingness to adjust and pivot, which requires curiosity and a low ego.

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Those are the qualities I look for in leaders. Nothing frustrates me more than a leader who doesn't have self-awareness and who's resistant to feedback, consciously or unconsciously. Because if you're not growing and constantly learning, then in an environment like this you're not working in the best interest of the organization.

Q: On the other side of the coin, what are the patterns you've seen in terms of how leaders can trip themselves up?

A: When people seem more self-centered, instead of putting others first, that can create a downward spiral for leaders. Sometimes it's a result of ego, and sometimes it's a result of insecurity. All of us have insecurities and lack confidence about certain things, but if those things start to influence one's need for self-preservation, then that starts to seep into values and integrity.

Other danger zones include fear of change or fear of driving change.

Granted, change can be scary. Change leads you to the unknown, and it's uncomfortable, but it's required for any organization. The final problem area I've seen is a willingness to compromise on ethics and not hold a clear line in difficult situations. That behavior will start to quickly spread as a cancer within an organization.

Q: What do you see as the biggest challenge of leadership?

A: The hardest part is staying focused and calm as you help a team and an organization navigate the unknown.

Q: So how do you do that personally?

A: One of the benefits of how I grew up, with parents who were both college professors, was that on the last day of school we would get on a plane and go to Greece and be with our extended family for the summer. There was stereotypical southern European energy and emotion, with ups and downs of relationships among extended family members.

That taught me, even though the world can seem like a crazy place at times, that there's no reason to overreact to something if we believe in ourselves and what we're doing, and we stay focused on what's important. So I've always been pretty grounded. I look at the world, look at what's happening around me, and just take it in as something that's interesting and navigable.

Q: How do you hire? What questions do you ask in job interviews?

A: One question I often ask is, what's a misperception about you? It's always interesting to see people's reactions. Do they look like somebody who needs to immediately answer because they feel they need to look smart? Or do they look like somebody who feels comfortable giving their answer some thought and taking a moment to figure it out?

I'm looking for clues around their authenticity, and their inquisitiveness. What kind of questions do they ask? How much have they thought about the opportunity? How do they demonstrate their thinking about the future of the business through the questions they ask or the comments they make? I'm looking for people who can think on their feet, who are authentic and genuine in how they do that, and who have a spark about the future.

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