



## Leading Through Disruption

Powerful conversations with prominent leaders on navigating this era of relentless change

# Leaders Have To Provide Clarity For People At All Levels In The Organization

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

**Lauterbach: What is the key quality you look for in future leaders?**

Sondergaard: Number one is attitude, and you can spot it early on with people. They are willing to take on more, and they demonstrate a tremendous pride in their work and a willingness to learn. Then you provide them with stretch opportunities to better understand their comfort zone.

**Bryant: What were important early influences that shaped how you lead?**

Sondergaard: I would say my parents. They are both immigrants to Canada, so I'm a first-generation Canadian. They didn't know anyone and engaged in the community for support. By the time my sister and I came along, they were giving back. We all became leaders in the community and my parents were role models for me in that way.

**Lauterbach: Leadership is getting much harder. What draws you to these difficult challenges?**

Sondergaard: I gravitate to the challenge of breaking them down into more manageable pieces. The crises of the last two years have been unprecedented, so organizations are stepping back and saying, “Even though we are facing a kaleidoscope of various issues, let’s prioritize and be clear on what we are and what we are not.” You have to provide that clarity for the staff at every level in the organization so they understand the *raison d’être* of the work they are doing. You cannot be all things to all people.

**Bryant: What are the most important leadership lessons you’ve learned?**

Sondergaard: One is learning to delegate. In the early stages of our careers, we often are promoted to leadership positions because of some subject-matter expertise, and we tend to manage a group of people who are doing similar activities. But when you become the leader, you don’t do the work anymore. It’s about understanding that your role is to lead and not to perform too many of the functions yourself. You’re there for escalation purposes.

*It’s not a linear path to  
leadership.*

Another lesson is that it’s not a linear path to leadership. It’s about

seeking out people that you can learn from and leveraging their experience. You can learn from bad bosses as much as good ones. If you have had a demotivating experience yourself, you probably won't want to make others feel the same way.

Another pivotal moment for me was when one of my mentors said to me, "Do your shoulder checks." The point is to continually look behind you and reflect on where you've come from. With the pandemic and other crises, it's easy for leaders to get down in the dumps and wonder how they are going to solve these problems.

Doing the shoulder checks means pausing, regrouping, and reminding yourself of all the things you've accomplished as a team up until that point. What are the things that worked really well for this organization and this team? What are the things that didn't work so well? Then let's see what insights we can use to put our best self forward, because you need to do that to be an effective leader.

**Lauterbach: We've all worked for bad bosses at one time or another. What are some specific behaviors that you've experienced?**

Sondergaard: One is a lack of listening. Some leaders will ask you for your input because somebody told them to, but it's clear they are not really interested. That obviously doesn't create an environment to encourage diversity of thinking. There's that expression that we have two ears and one mouth for a reason. So when you ask a question, you need to be quiet and listen to the answer.

I was on one board where the chair spoke first, instead of last, every time there was an issue that was being debated. Because he was very aggressive about his position, there was no discussion after he spoke. Even the most confident board members realized the discussion was not going to go anywhere.

**Bryant: In addition to listening skills, what constitutes great leadership in a board room?**

Sondergaard: Consensus-building. That doesn't mean being in 100 percent agreement. It means finding a solution that people can live with. When there are disparate views, you have to understand why people are objecting or supporting a particular position. It's good to look for win-win outcomes, but you also have to be able to make a decision at the cost of one stakeholder over another.

**Lauterbach: What are some other leadership qualities that are important to you?**

Sondergaard: I heard a great story recently that relates to this. The Indigenous culture has seven teachings that all relate to different animals. The teaching of the wolf is about humility. The reason it's represented by the wolf is because wolves live in a pack, and each wolf will only survive if the pack survives. That really resonated with me because it's not only the personal dimension of humility, but it's also the dimension of a symbiotic relationship with the team and with everyone else.

**Bryant: What are the key qualities you look for in a CEO? What questions do you ask in a job interview?**

Sondergaard: A friend shared a great phrase – that your technical skills get you hired and your interpersonal skills can get you fired. It's really about how the leader solves problems and interacts with people. How do they characterize their leadership style and motivate others? How do they ask questions about difficult decisions and build consensus?

Those questions will help you understand how they are going to act in a crisis. What was their role during the pandemic? How did they handle that? What was the result? And what did they learn from it? Not everybody got it right at the beginning of the pandemic, and so you want to hear about lessons they learned.

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