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A Key Role For Leaders: Help People Understand What Good Looks Like

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Barbara Humpton, CEO of Siemens USA and host of The Optimist Outlook podcast, shared key leadership insights in my latest "Art of Leading" interview. [Subscribe here](#) to receive future interviews.

Q. How have you evolved as a leader over these last few years?

A. The greatest aha moment of the last three years was recognizing that the muscle we needed to focus on developing was related to our view of change. The core idea is that if we could optimize for change, that would be the greatest gift we could give to our organization.

Often when you talk to people about their strategy or about change and transformation, they will say, "We have culture A and we're trying to

get to culture B.” Or, “We have business focus A and we’re trying to get to business focus B.” It’s almost like moving from stasis to stasis.

What’s been fascinating about these last three years is that every couple of months, and sometimes multiple times each month, there’s something new. It’s this ever-changing, ever-shifting need to refocus, refocus, refocus. So you ask yourself, what would it look like if you optimized for being in a state of constant change? What would you do differently? I’m loving that as the intellectual challenge of today.

Q. How do you operationalize that as a leader?

A. One of our very first lessons during the pandemic was embracing the idea of “glocal.” As a business, our focus had been on addressing global needs, but when we needed to act very locally, we had room for improvement. Covid was a perfect example of how the same thing can happen everywhere, but it’s going to play out at different times and with different conditions on the ground. So we had to empower people.

Soon after the pandemic hit, we told everyone that we have only three priorities: take care of the people, take care of the business, and look for opportunities to be helpful. In the US, we added one more, which was to look over the horizon to think of how the world is going to be different long-term because of Covid.

With that as the only framework, then leaders everywhere were able to do what needed to be done. We saw very different responses in various places and the business thrived. Empowerment is key to being able to navigate change, and “glocal” has emerged as one of our very strong themes for how we operate today.

Q. One of the big challenges of driving transformation is making people more open to change, because human beings generally crave a certain amount of predictability.

A. Yes, but why do we crave that constancy? Often it’s because we crave knowing what’s expected of us. People want to know the rules of the game, and they want to know they can perform well within those rules. So part of what we have to do as leaders is help people understand what good looks like.

One of the changes Siemens made globally was to abolish performance-management theater. Because the idea that you can set objectives at the beginning of the year and then objectively rate people at the end of the year is theater, and we abolished it in favor of “growth

talks” and constant communication.

*People want to know the rules
of the game.*

We also had this industrial-age idea that there was a perfect image of a leader, based on, say, ten characteristics that you would rate on a scale of one to ten. Are you a 100-point leader or are you somewhere in between zero and 100 and you need to develop? We abolished that model completely.

We set a new framework for our leaders around four company priorities — customer impact, technology with purpose, growth mindset, and empowerment. You might ask how those four things give people a sense of knowing how they fit in and what’s expected of them. The answer is that we’re building more of a culture that says we want people to embrace the disruption.

We’ve begun to explain to leaders across the organization that change is happening, and we’re looking for leaders who can step into that and lead through it, engage their employees, get them to align and focus their skills and abilities to the problem at hand, and then quiet the external noise so they operate in the zone.

Q. What were important early influences for you that shaped who you are as a leader?

A. I grew up in a college town. Lexington, Va., has the Virginia Military Institute and Washington and Lee University. So I grew up in an environment where there was this constant “lazy susan” of exciting people coming through town — speakers, artists, musicians and other amazing people who had done remarkable things in the world. So I grew up with a very strong sense that what individuals do really matters.

My parents are both math professors and taught us not to fear math. And they believed in a Renaissance education. Everyone in our family played an instrument. We were all sent to summer camp for the arts, where we painted and danced. My parents hosted exchange students when I was in middle school and high school, and just before my senior year in college, I flew to South Africa to live with a family there for ten weeks. That combination of experiences gave me a deep-seated confidence that if you’re interested in something, you can learn it, teach it and ultimately be it.

Q. When you mentor people, what are the most common themes that come up in those conversations?

A. First and foremost is that they want to know how to move up in the organization. And my favorite question to ask people is, which way is up for you? Do you want to be closer to customers? Maybe that's more of an outward focus. Do you want to be a renowned expert in your field? Maybe that's going deeper into a subject matter. Do you enjoy month-after-month, quarter-after-quarter administrative work? Then, in that case, you might want to move up in the org chart.

My favorite question to ask people is, which way is up for you?

I try to challenge people about what they want to do beyond getting a bigger title and help them figure out where they would be happiest. When do you make your greatest contributions? What do you see yourself doing five years from now? That becomes a totally different dialogue.

Q. What is the hardest part of leadership?

A. It's around the paradox of empowerment. As leaders, we strive to play important roles because it's exciting to create the conditions where remarkable things happen. We can get addicted to the engagement. The team comes to you to ask for advice. They come to you looking for a vision. They come to you asking for your perspectives on the market or a customer's needs. The tactile feedback that you get of being engaged as a leader is exhilarating and it can be addictive.

But here's the paradox, especially for a company like Siemens. We serve hundreds of thousands of customers around the world. Therefore, we as leaders can't be involved in everything. True empowerment by definition means you have to be willing to not know what's going on. You have to be willing to step back, take your hands off the wheel and trust that you've created the conditions where others are going to be engaged and they have the thrill of the tactile response, either from their teams or from the market or elsewhere.

So there's a little bit of that sensory deprivation that has to happen in leadership today, and we have to look for satisfaction in new and different places than maybe we did when we were leading teams of ten or 100 people, when we could know what was going on. Empowerment

is the most important thing but it's the hardest to pull off.

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