



Art of Leading

Powerful insights from top leaders.



Sasan Goodarzi, CEO of Intuit

Leading In This Environment Requires Courage, Velocity and Compassion



Adam Bryant [in](#)

Senior Managing Director at The ExCo Group; Author, "The CEO Test"

February 14, 2023

Sasan Goodarzi, the CEO of Intuit, shared his key leadership insights in my latest "Art of Leading" interview. [Subscribe here](#) to receive future interviews.

Q. You took over as CEO in early 2019. How did you navigate these past few years of crises and disruption?

A. Being a CEO doesn't come with instructions, and you don't really know what it's like to be a CEO until you step into the seat. Jeff Weiner, one of our directors, said in one of our board meetings that what CEOs deal with on a quarterly basis now used to happen only once or twice a year.

And there are three areas of focus that I've shared with the

company a lot in the last three years. One is that you have to have courage. This is a very lonely job, and a lot of people will give you a lot of different opinions. At the end of the day, you have to make up your mind.

The second is velocity. I've always believed that speed is a differentiator in life, but I never realized how important it was until the last three years, because anything that you choose to do, you realize the world has moved much faster. And I use the word velocity instead of speed, because velocity is the combination of speed with the direction you've chosen. The last thing is compassion, and really understanding what people are going through. They could be smiling, but you never know what people are dealing with.

Q. Can you elaborate on your point about velocity? How do you hit the balance point of pushing fast but making sure you're bringing everybody along?

A. I've never looked back and said I wish I would have gone slower. What I have learned over time is that people are very resilient. Even though people may have a lot on their plate, if you focus on the direction and what's important, and you are relentless about it, people are resilient.

They will either reinvent themselves to want to be a part of the next chapter or they'll drop out. It's about having a lot of conviction around where you choose to go and knowing that velocity is a differentiator.

Q. Can you give me an example of how you push for velocity?

A. Four years ago, when we refreshed our company strategy, we narrowed our list of priorities to five big bets for our customers and for the company. And we call them bets for two reasons: It's about courage and risk-taking. I've been with the company for 18 years, and I've long felt that we didn't take the swings that we should have for our customers because we were risk-averse, and we would see more of what could go wrong versus what could go right.

It's a new chapter for us as a company to have the courage to take big swings.

My view is that 99 percent of decisions are reversible, which means you can take a risk and, for the most part, you're not betting the company on it. So we use the word bet to convey that it's a new chapter for us as a company to have the courage to take big swings, and to know that we are going to take additional risks. We will fail, we will miss, but we will get more right than we will get wrong. To this day, I and my team will correct folks to explain, "No, that's not a priority. That's a bet and let's treat it like a bet."

Q. What do you consider the biggest leadership challenge facing CEOs now?

A. The signal-to-noise ratio is the biggest challenge. There is so much going on in the broader environment, so what do you listen to and what is your compass? Because you get pulled in different directions by customers and shareholders. So how do you lead and transform in an environment where there's so much noise? How do you decide what's most important and where you're going to have conviction? Where are you going to place your bets?

Q. What were important early influences for you?

A. My dad passed away when I was nine years old. But what I remember about him is that he was just very principled. It was all about hard work for him, because he started out with nothing. I learned from him that if you want something, you've got to work for it.

I also came to the United States from Iran when I was nine. Eight months later, the revolution started and that's when Iran took American hostages. I was bullied every single day and told to go back home. It got to a point where I refused to tell anyone I was Iranian.

I skipped school often and had horrible grades all the way through high school. My mom and my older brother even said to me, "We give up on you." Then I finally decided that I'm going to show everybody who I am. I decided I've got to make something of myself.

Q. What's your mindset for dealing with all the daily challenges of leadership now?

A. Nothing can be worse than what I experienced coming

here from Iran. When I have a bad day, I think about those times. And you have to make a difference every day.

I talk a lot about treating every day like it's day one. How do you feel when you first show up to a job? You're curious. You're asking questions. You want to make an impact. That's what I try to role model every day. This job is a ride of a lifetime, but it's not for a lifetime. So I want to make a difference every day that I'm in this role.

Q. How do you hire?

A. There are two things that I focus on. One is, are they a culture fit for the company, and are they willing to evolve and change our culture? And do they know how? The second thing I focus on is winning. My view is that we're a sports team and you've got to win, and our winning is defined by the goals that we set for employees, customers, and shareholders.

So what I test for is whether the executive has just gotten used to all the perks of being an executive or do they understand what it takes to win? Do they understand what it takes to deliver transformative results?

Those are the two things, and I turn down more than 80 percent of the people I interview. Half of them don't pass my culture test, and the half who pass the culture test don't pass the winning test. I don't want corporate executives. I want winners.

Q. How do you test for their drive to win?

A. I will ask, what does success look like for you? How do you keep score? You will learn a lot about someone by how they answer that question. And sometimes they're trying to figure out the right answer to give you, which is the wrong answer in itself.

[Subscribe here](#) to get future "Art of Leading" interviews.