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Hal Rosenbluth

It's So Important To Be Curious About The World, And Not Just About Work



Adam Bryant [in](#)

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

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Hal Rosenbluth, a veteran leader and entrepreneur who is now CEO of [New Ocean Health Solutions](#), shared his key leadership insights in my latest "Art of Leading" interview. [Subscribe here](#) to receive future interviews.

Q: You've built and scaled a number of companies, including Rosenbluth International, the travel management company, earlier in your career. What are your core principles of leadership?

A: Trust is critical. I'll use a farming term, which is that you can't fake farming. You can't say to somebody that my corn is knee high by the Fourth of July when in fact it's browned out. It is what it is. I've always believed that everybody has

an inherent ability to know whether somebody's being honest with them, so you always have to be honest and explain your decisions, even for topics and issues that might be difficult.

Q: How do you hire? What qualities do you look for?

A: If you're from the same area where we work, I'll ask you to drive with me to a restaurant. Typically, I'll ask the interviewee to drive. I'll ask them questions, but I'm watching their driving habits. How do they deal with traffic? Do they have agility? Are they stuck in their ways and just sit there in traffic when there might be other lanes or routes to take?

With really key hires, I'll bring them to my ranch in North Dakota. I want to see how they do when they're in unfamiliar places. Do they shy away from cattle? Do they want to help when I get a bunch of my cowboy friends together to do some branding? How do they get along with folks they've never met before, and might be different from them? It's all about behavior. It's not about their skills. I'm looking for emotional intelligence.

I was interviewing someone for a CFO position and we were at my ranch. The next day we were putting up fence, and we all went in an SUV out to the prairie and he got locked in the car and couldn't get out. The child lock was on, and he couldn't figure out how to open the door. I encouraged him at that point to head to the airport.

Q: What are some other qualities you're looking for?

A: Kindness. If they're not kind, there's going to be no collaboration with their colleagues. People have to be authentic and genuine. So many people try to fake who they are but their real personality comes out over time.

You've got to be agile. You've got to be faster than others.

And it's so important to be curious, but not just curious at work. You've got to be curious about the world. People talk about the new normal, but nothing is normal. So you have to always be looking at so many different things outside of your particular business. You've got to be agile. You've got to be

faster than others, and that means getting great thinking into your company and then executing.

Q: What were important early influences for you?

A: Lousy and great teachers.

Q: Why do you say that?

A: Because they always put me down, and wouldn't allow for my curiosity. In eighth grade, I had an English teacher and we were studying poetry. Everybody was bored, and she made the mistake of saying, "If anybody thinks they can teach this class better than me, just raise your hand." So I raised my hand. And she then made the mistake of letting me teach the next three days.

So the next day I brought in a Simon and Garfunkel album. She said, "What are you doing?" I said, "We're going to listen to the album. It's poetry." And she said, "It's not poetry. They're songs." And I said, "Well, why don't you just listen to the words?" So we listened to one side on the first day, and other side on the second day. On the third day, she said we had to give people a test, and I told her, "Poetry is subjective. I'm going to give everybody an A."

At that point, the school called my folks into the principal's office and I was removed from her class. But my favorite teacher was my kindergarten teacher. She allowed for my creativity. She allowed everybody to do what they felt comfortable doing without putting them down in one way or another.

Q: What is your advice to aspiring entrepreneurs?

A: Be careful what you wish for. If you want to start a company, you've got to be clear about your resources, where you're going, and the problem you're solving. Is it something that's going to be important three years from now? Things happen so fast.

You've got to know that you're not going to be disintermediated. That's key. Because when you start a company, it takes a while to get it going. By the time you get it going, you want to make sure you're not going to be irrelevant.

Q: You've also been a part of very large companies. What's your advice to business school students who want to take more of a corporate route?

A: First, select the right organization to join. Each company has a reputation. Talk to people who are there. The last thing you want to do is join a company and not like it. What is the leadership about? Are there a lot of corporate politics? Do people like working there?

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You've got to fight bureaucracy, and if it's too bad you have to leave. It's hard to break down the bureaucracy of a mature company. It's easier when you start small and build a company.

Q: Part of the paradox of big companies is that they need to restructure themselves and create these matrix organizations to cross-pollinate and innovate. On the other hand, those additional new structures can also slow things down.

A: It creates indecision. And then they've got to restructure again. How many times do companies restructure? I turn on CNBC and often hear about companies restructuring after they just restructured a year ago, and it's not lifting their stock price.

Q: What is the hardest part of leadership?

A: Leaving early from work without people thinking that I'm not doing anything. I don't have to spend the whole day at work. My work is in my head. And my best business has been done outside the office at my ranch. I'll get on a horse or I'll go for a walk. I have to clear my mind.

There's too much going on in this world. I've got to eject a lot of stuff out of my head and allow new thinking to come in.

Q: I'm sure you've done a ton of coaching and mentoring of senior executives on your various teams. When you reflect on all those conversations, are there certain messages you convey most often?

A: Take what you do very seriously but not yourself. If

everybody's taking things seriously and not letting their egos override the discussions, that's a good start.

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