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Sowmyanarayan Sampath

A Few Clear Priorities Will Help You Save Time and Drive Execution Faster



Adam Bryant [in](#)

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

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Sowmyanarayan Sampath, CEO of Verizon Consumer Group, shared his key leadership insights in my latest "Art of Leading" interview. [Subscribe here](#) to receive future interviews.

Q. What is your framework for leadership?

A. The first is the concept of "commander's intent," which means being very clear about your strategy, and then empower your teams and check in often with them. Once the pandemic hit, the commander's intent became much more important. For decades, we followed a certain playbook. With Covid, all those playbooks went out the window.

The second element is that every time I feel my team is stretched, I'm wrong. If we need something to happen, they always find a way to rally. When people work together, they feed off each other and bring that extra energy.

The third piece for me is around kindness. Kindness doesn't mean you don't hold people accountable or to high standards. But you do it in the same way that you would want somebody to deliver that feedback to you.

Q. Your second point speaks to a universal challenge for leaders—finding that balance of how hard to push—because people have been dealing with a lot in their personal lives these last few years.

A. Historically, companies have done a pretty decent job of performance management. Then the pandemic hit, and every company backed away from performance management. People were just doing day-to-day tasks. That led to some unfairness, because the people who did really well ended up taking on more work, while others didn't do much.

Then that imbalance grows bigger and bigger, which creates more tension in the team and the folks who are burning out burn out more. So there's a distribution that gets wider when performance is not managed.

When everything is important, nothing is important.

So in that environment, you need more focus. I find that 30 to 50 percent of the work people do is unfocused by nature. Leaders have to provide more focus, because when everything is important, nothing is important. If you are able to clarify a few clear priorities, then you can save a lot of time and drive execution faster. I do that in every job I take, and people are energized by it because they know what is expected of them.

Another key thing with priorities is that they have to come with a trade-off. If you are able to prioritize easily, it probably means they don't carry any trade-offs, which means the priorities are kind of bogus. So part of prioritization is

making hard trade-offs. For example, I'm telling my team to drive market share in phones, which means there will be some slippage in other categories. That's a trade-off I have made.

Q. What were important early influences for you?

A. I grew up in Kolkata, India, with middle-class values about the importance of education, respecting the system and your elders, and having humility. If you ask almost any Indian who grew up in the same era, they would say some version of the same three things.

Another big influence is this concept of karma. It's a very Indian concept about how you are on earth to do the right things, but the reward for that may or may not happen to you in your lifetime. Being comfortable with that concept has been very helpful.

It's not an easy one because everything in life is so gamified right now, but this concept says that you can work your tail off and the rewards may or may not come to you. As a result, it's helped manage expectations and focus on work without worrying too much about the rewards.

Q. Where does your drive come from?

A. Part of our middle-class values is that there is no shortcut for hard work. What drives me most is that I have to leave something better than I found it. I have this strong conviction that I have to bend the course of the river. My parents did that for me, as they helped fund my education.

As I grow older, people have become a bigger priority in my life and my role. And so I'm focused on the impact I can have on people's lives. How can I provide a leadership framework for them? How can they grow?

Q. How do you set the tone to make it clear to your team that you expect them to operate like a true team?

A. One of my biggest roles is friction management. I spend an inordinate amount of time clarifying roles and responsibilities for the team to make sure everyone is aligned. But there are always going to be some jump balls somewhere in the organization, and 90 percent of the

friction comes from those jump balls. But by getting people sorted on roles and responsibilities, I'm able to take a lot of friction out of the process.

One of my biggest roles is friction management.

The second thing is speed of decisions. I have this rule that if two of my team members have been arguing about something for more than three days and cannot come to a decision, despite having all the data, then they have to bring it to me. I will make a decision within 24 hours of getting all the data. They quickly learn that they'd probably rather make a decision themselves than bring it to me.

Q. How do you hire?

A. I look for spikiness. By definition, everyone I interview has already cleared a certain threshold of being strong in terms of IQ and EQ and knowing the technical aspects of their job. But I find candidates who spike in terms of being truly exceptional in one area, whether it's analytics or client management, to be much more successful. I want to know, what is your superpower? I probably spend 50 to 60 percent of my interview time on that one question.

I'm also looking for diversity of thought. Of course, we want diversity of gender, ethnicity, orientation. But diversity of thought is super-important. So one of the questions I ask is, "Take a contrary view on a topic that you have really strong convictions about. Then for the next 15 minutes, let's talk through that." It shows people's ability to frame conversations, and to communicate, and how convinced they are that they bring something slightly different to the table.

Q. I'm sure you've done a ton of mentoring over your career. What is the most common theme that comes up in those conversations?

A. In corporate America in general, we've become much more matrixed overall. I find people who transition from command-and-control leadership structures to a matrixed environment often struggle. So I spend a lot of time on how to manage in a matrixed environment.

Q. So what is your best advice on how to successfully manage in a matrix?

A. The first thing is the concept of shared success and understanding the metrics that people get measured on in the matrix. I find that more than 50 percent of the time, there's a disconnect on that. So do the hard work of aligning metrics. If somebody in supply chain wants to take out cost, and somebody else is focused on driving revenue, there is no amount of conversation and coaching that can fix that misalignment. So you have to have clear metrics.

The second part is the emotional piece of it, and reminding people that we win together and lose together. The third is around the importance of communication and stakeholder management. And the fourth is about creating movement for people and giving them new roles across the matrix. For example, I never did sales until a few years ago. I was so convinced I knew all the things that were wrong with sales. I have this thesis that everyone is good at someone else's job.

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