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Fran Horowitz

# You Have To Influence People Rather Than Telling Them What To Do



**Adam Bryant** [in](#)

Senior Managing Director at The ExCo Group; Author, "The Leap To

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***Fran Horowitz, CEO of Abercrombie & Fitch Co., shared her key leadership insights in my latest "Art of Leading" interview. [Subscribe here](#) to receive future interviews.***

**Q. What is your playbook for leadership?**

A. My leadership style started very early in my career and has been consistent through to today. It's about being a real person. It's about letting your ego go and being approachable, so that you can talk with anyone in the organization.

Once I was elevated to this position, I said to my head of HR and my team, "Do not ever let me be the empress who

wears no clothes. I don't ever want to be told what you think I want to hear. Good, bad or ugly—please share it with me.”

**Q. Where does your drive comes from? These C-suite jobs carry a lot of responsibility and require a lot of stamina.**

A. It's just born in you. For me, it's that simple. I don't go home at night saying, “Oh my gosh, the burden.” I go home and I say, “That was a great day. I solved a problem. I enjoyed it. I helped some people. Associates are happy.” It just is a part of your DNA. All that stuff started for me at a very young age, and it was very internal.

**Q. What is your playbook for driving transformation?**

A. One thread throughout my entire career has been fixing businesses. I can look at a situation, step back, figure out where it needs to go and push forward. Early in my career, I walked into a business that was spiraling and I was able to fix it.

The confidence from making those right moves builds over time. But there are always lessons on how to refine that approach. In my previous role, my playbook was too aggressive and too fast, and I probably lost people along the way because of it.

The key for me is that they have to be open-minded,

So when I came to Abercrombie, I did have to step away from the playbook and say, how much can I get done and how quickly? So my approach is go to function-by-function. First, we had to focus on the product, then we turned to marketing. We've gone through almost every function at this point and rebuilt each one of them.

**Q. When you step into a role like this, you have to assess the existing leadership team and decide who is going to stay or go. How do you do that?**

A. I'm incredibly proud of the team that we've built because they are a blend of those who have been here for a while and those who have joined me after I stepped into this role.

Those two things coming together make magic, because you have the appreciation for the history and the legacy, and you also get new thinking.

The key for me is that they have to be open-minded, and you can understand that about a person fairly quickly. You challenge them on a particular topic and see which way they go. If they continue to go in the same direction and they dig their heels in, you do have to step back and say, "You know what? Perhaps this next chapter isn't for you and it's time for us to move on."

You're always looking for smart, curious, and optimistic people, but they have to be flexible and agile. If they say, in effect, "The way we always did it is the right way to do it," you can figure that out pretty quickly.

**Q. What are the rules of the road that you set for your leadership team?**

A. Number one, do not ever surprise me. I don't care how bad the news is. The sooner you tell me, the faster we can react to it, and once it's done we're going to move on. Another big principle here is around influencing people rather than telling them what to do.

When I recruit people, I say to them, "You have to understand people park their egos at the door. You may have heard that in other places. Here it really happens. Even though A, B, and C don't report to you, you have to work together as a team. It doesn't matter here if you have a dotted line or if you have a straight line. It's about working together."

**Q. Can you talk a bit more about how you hire?**

A. The most important thing I look for is cultural fit. They could be the smartest person in the room. That doesn't matter if they do not fit in culturally. That means being humble, being open, being willing to listen to feedback. All those things make up an Abercrombie associate, and if you don't have those, you don't win.

So I'm looking for whether they are going to fit in, because others have figured out in earlier interviews whether the person has the skills to do the job. My focus is, what kind of

person are they? What have they done? What do they like? What don't they like? You try to understand them through asking a lot of questions and probing about their leadership, the successes they've had, and the challenges they've faced.

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