



Ashwini Zenooz

Be Intentional With Innovation—It Has To Matter; Otherwise, Don't Build It



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Ashwini Zenooz, CEO of [Commure](#), a healthcare technology company, 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 when you step into a new role?

A. You have to communicate your core values very clearly to the organization. For me, it's important to do what you say you're going to do, and to lead with respect and trust. It's also really important for me to have intentional innovation.

As a healthcare leader, I've seen a lot of innovation that was really just the pursuit of some shiny new object. And that can be really disruptive, because you're not thinking about the north star, which is taking care of people. Now that I'm at a tech company, I'm very clear about that intentional innovation. It has to matter; otherwise don't build it. You can't boil the ocean, so you've got to think about your priorities and the metrics around them.

Q. What were early influences that shaped you as a leader?

A. I'm an immigrant, and there was an important inflection point for me when we moved to this country. We lived in Queens, New York, and we were relatively poor. You realize that you have to work really hard to get what you want. I've been unabashedly ambitious since I was a child. You want things in life, and you have to keep trying, because life doesn't hand things to you, and you get knocked down fairly frequently.

I was lucky to have parents who said to me, you've got to just keep getting back up. Take the punches, figure out how to get around it, and try to get up and build the grit. It really shaped me, because I realized that there are things I want and it's okay to want things and be ambitious. But you've got to work for it, and you've got to be able to roll with the punches.

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Another inflection point for me was the loss of my mom. As a physician, I was shocked that I didn't know that she had cancer and that we caught it at such a late stage. I became a caregiver, and it really helped me understand how vulnerable you can be at times.

Others don't see what you're going through, because we all have a façade when you're at work. It really helped me build my ability to lead with compassion. You never know what people are dealing with.

Q. What kinds of things were you doing outside of class when you were younger?

A. I loved debate. I spoke many languages growing up, and learned more when I came to the United States. When I moved to this country as a teenager, I didn't know how to swim. So I took it upon myself to learn to swim and dive, and went on to compete in many different water sports. That drive shows up not only in my professional life but it's also in my interests and hobbies.

Q. Did you see yourself becoming a CEO at some point?

A. I've always enjoyed leadership — getting others excited about a goal and moving everybody forward and feeling empowered. That's a great feeling.

Q. Leadership carries a lot of burdens, too.

A. It does. But for me, what you get out of leadership outweighs what you are missing from not participating in it. I wake up excited every morning because I think about how to move things forward and drive this organization.

But you do take on other people's problems. And there is the loneliness when you're a leader. At the end of the day, the buck stops with you, and you've got to make the hard calls. And often the people on the other side don't have the information that you have when you're making decisions. But you also have the privilege of having all that data on your side.

Q. When you think back to your early management roles, were there any speed bumps?

A. I'm a physician, and when I became head of my radiology department, I focused on competence as the key thing on the team above all else. So I rewarded people who were competent but didn't have great EQ at times. That was an important lesson in what not to do.

I also learned about leading through influence because you quickly realize that you can only give out orders for so long. At some point, people will nod and look the other way. Writing memos doesn't cut it. You've got to make sure that you help the organization understand the mission and where you're driving things forward.

Q. When you give feedback and coaching to senior

executives, what is a common theme that comes up?

A. A big one is making sure they understand the larger picture of how your organization operates. Often people can be very focused on their own functional roles, which creates challenges when you're having conversations about the broader mission and how you need them to be agile. But people can be defensive, and they often go back to what they can control. It's a common theme I've seen, where you have to help people realize that they are part of a broader puzzle.

Q. How do you hire? What questions do you ask in job interviews?

A. I like to ask how people work in an environment where there's so much change. I will ask for examples of how they had a particular strategy to move forward, and then suddenly something happened, like a pandemic. How did they change?

It helps me understand whether they can embrace change. Can they think ahead? Can they communicate, and have a vision of where they're going? And do they really have the resilience to weather the storm, or are they going to come to me to help them every step of the way? And do you get everybody on your team on board to move in that new direction?

Q. When you look ahead two years from now, how do you want to be better as a leader?

A. It's an evolution. Leadership is like life. You're continuing to evolve as a human being. You're continuing to grow. For me, I always want to make sure that I'm doing right by people, and I question myself a lot.

I spend a lot of time building competence in different areas, but when I make a mistake, I'm really hard on myself. I'm working on how to be a little bit easier on myself. We're all human, everybody makes mistakes and it's okay and you can learn from it. I don't think I've mastered that. Sometimes you can only focus on the things you can control.

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