

Insights

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ART OF LEADING



Leadership: How to Make it Look Easy — with Jassi Chadha, CEO of Axtria | Art of Leading

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Jaswinder (Jassi) Chadha, CEO of Axtria, shares key leadership insights on how to make it look easy, expect failure, and embrace humility in this [Art of Leading](#) interview with [The ExCo Group's Adam Bryant](#).

Q. What is your approach to leadership?

A. It's important for leaders to make the work look easy because that inspires people to go forward. If they make it feel too hard, many people may not be inspired to follow. You also have to live your values so that others will live the same values. The third thing is the importance of leading from the front but always being in service of the people you work for rather than telling people what to do.

Q. What is the most important value at your company?

A. Humility. I've learned that you need to be very confident and strong to be humble. As you go through entrepreneurship, you're going to make a lot of mistakes, and you learn from those mistakes. So, fail fast, learn from it, and then you get better. Humility gives you the confidence to accept that you made a mistake because if you don't even accept the mistakes, you're not going to learn from them.

Q. You've started two companies. How was the experience of starting the second one different from the first?

A. When I was a first-time entrepreneur in 2000, I was young and naïve. We struggled for the first year or so, but ultimately, we were quite successful and had a phenomenal exit in 2007 when we were acquired by a large company called Cognizant Technology Solutions.

What I learned from being part of Cognizant is that companies that are able to grow to a much larger scale rely much more on systems and processes rather than just talent. So, for my second company, we did, of course, focus on talent, but we also invested early on in systems and processes. We invested in a financial system before we had revenue, and we invested in a jobs management platform before we had employees.

I was also more afraid of failure the second time around, partly because I had not met many serial entrepreneurs. My definition of a serial entrepreneur is someone who becomes more successful with their next company than their previous company. It's extremely rare. I had to do some soul-searching about why I was more worried about the second company.

I realized a couple of things. When you are a first-time entrepreneur, you need to have perseverance because you're going to fail before you succeed, and you need to have humility to accept that you've failed and learn from your mistakes. But once you've had great success, it's inevitable that you will be less humble and you will have less perseverance. And we've actually had more short-term failures with this company than the first, in spite of being experienced entrepreneurs.

Q. What do you think is the hardest part of leadership?

A. It's living up to your own expectations and knowing that you're going to fail but still having to make it look easy. Every day, every week, every month, something really bad will happen. How do you not bury your head in the sand and recognize that those things have happened and that you're going to fix them so they won't happen again? And how do you do that and still make it look easy? I think that is the hardest part of being a leader.

Q. You've mentioned this theme of making it look easy a couple of times. Can you unpack that a bit more for me?

A. When you are a leader, a lot of people look up to you. You inspire them. You guide them. Most people are not entrepreneurs, and most people give up when they find out how hard it is to do this.

That's why leadership and entrepreneurship are interchangeable. If most people knew how hard this is, they would give up a lot sooner than they actually do. Entrepreneurs have that eternal optimism. You have to make it look easy so that people don't give up. They keep on trying.

Q. What were the early influences that shaped you and your leadership style today?

A. I grew up in India. My dad was an officer and paratrooper in the Indian Army, so he was always away from the family in unknown locations. My mom was an amazing lady, and she had the biggest influence on me. In the 1960s, she had the audacity to go get a Master's and a Ph.D. She was the first woman to get a Ph.D. in mathematics from the Indian Institute of Technology, which is considered the top engineering school in India.

She became a professor, and I lived with her and my brother on a university campus. And there was a lot of math and a lot of intellect around us. So, the pressure to do well was pretty intense from a young age, but there was nothing to prepare me for being an entrepreneur. In fact, both my parents immigrated to India with absolutely nothing, and they had to rebuild, so they indoctrinated into us the idea of not taking risks—if you get a job, stick to it and stay in that for the rest of your life.

Then I came to the U.S. for my Master's degree, and I wound up at the University of Texas in El Paso and started hearing about these great entrepreneurs. My favorite entrepreneur was Michael Dell, who had the audacity to basically take on Compaq, Hewlett-Packard, and IBM by building and selling computers out of his dorm room. It inspires you to think that ordinary people can do these extraordinary things.

When I told my parents after four-and-a-half years of working that I was quitting my job to become an entrepreneur, my mom thought I was a disaster. Why would anyone leave a job where they are making so much money, doing well, and getting promotions every one or two years to take the risk of starting a company? Then, when we sold the company in 2007, she didn't understand that—if you had a company that was doing well, why did you sell it?

Q. How do you hire?

A. I usually try to scare people in the interview into thinking that they shouldn't take this job. I tell them, "We are evaluating each other to see if this is the right fit for our company. For us, you are going to be one of a thousand people. For you, this is going to be the only job you have at that moment, so you're taking a lot more risk on me than I'm taking on you." Most people don't think in those terms, and they focus instead on selling themselves.

For me, having the right people on the bus is a lot more important than figuring out which seat they're going to sit in. So, I spend a lot of time trying to evaluate if this person is going to align with our values. I spend a lot of time asking questions like, What challenges have you faced? Where have you failed? Where have you had conflict? What have you learned?