



## Insights

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### ART OF LEADING



## Loyalty Down and Up: Mitchell B. Reiss, Former President and CEO of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation | Art of Leading

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***Mitchell B. Reiss, who has held leadership roles in academia, the State Department, the private sector, and the non-profit world, shares his approach to leadership, how loyalty down engenders loyalty up, and the need for more kindness in the workplace in this [Art of Leading](#) interview with [The ExCo Group's Adam Bryant](#).***

**Q. You've worked in so many different fields and different leadership contexts. What's your playbook for navigating all these new challenges?**

A. It starts with an appreciation that just about everybody you meet on Day 1 is going to know more about the organization than you do. You can do a lot of research and prepare yourself, but you really don't understand the beating heart of a place until you get there.

Everybody else does, so the challenge is to get them to share with you the insights, the lessons, and the experiences that they've accumulated over the years to accelerate that learning curve as much as possible for you.

So, you have to create a safe environment. People have to feel comfortable trusting you, and there can't be any fear of retaliation or punishment if they tell you things that you probably aren't eager to hear but that you absolutely need to hear to do your job effectively.

You have to come in with a bit of humility and in listening mode so you can discern pretty quickly the people who are sharing the truth with you and also want to be part of the solution rather than just complaining.

**Q. How do you create that safe space beyond simply saying there's a safe space?**

A. You can say it until you're blue in the face, but people aren't going to necessarily believe you. Why should they? You're a stranger. So, you have to model the behavior in everything you do, and it has to be one of the values that permeates the organization.

I was very fortunate in one of my leadership positions when I was dealing with a "burning platform," and we had to make a lot of changes very quickly. Change has no constituency, of course, and many people were upset. One of my senior people sent an email around to some of her colleagues complaining about me, but she included me on the email thread by mistake.

I called her to my office. She probably thought she was going to be fired. I told her two things. "First, it is completely natural to vent about your colleagues and your bosses. I'd prefer you not hurt the morale of other people. Second, tell me first and see if I can fix it, whatever's bothering you."

I knew she was going to share what happened across the organization because she thought it was going to be a terrible meeting. She didn't know I was going to respond that way. That really helped reset the conversation throughout the organization. She did me a huge favor.

**Q. What are the key values that define your leadership style?**

A. I'd start with aggressive transparency. A lot of organizations fail, or they're not as successful as they could be, because people don't share information. They hide it when things go badly, which is the time you most need to share information so people can help you fix the problem. Being honest is a huge asset in any organization, especially one that isn't doing well.

The second thing is loyalty to employees. In one of my leadership roles, I told the board that I didn't care about our customers but that I cared a lot about our employees. The reason was that if I took care of my employees, they would take care of the customers. It was a resort with an educational facility, and our visitors wanted a memorable and meaningful experience. I needed to empower people to provide that. I think loyalty down engenders loyalty up, and I learned that firsthand working with General Powell at the White House and then Secretary Powell when he was Secretary of State.

The third thing is communication. There are all kinds of studies that show leaders under-communicate by a factor of three. You think you've said something once, and it couldn't be clearer—everybody's going to get on board, and they're all as excited as you are. It never works that way. You have to communicate through emails, one-to-ones, and team meetings. Hopefully, all of those will lead to trust and openness, and that's the secret sauce of success in any field. People have to trust each other.

**Q. You've worked extensively in the field of diplomacy, which involves a lot of grey areas and subtle negotiations. What is your key lesson from that work?**

A. My years of negotiating have taught me that the one indispensable ingredient that you need to bring to these kinds of talks is empathy. You have to put yourself in the shoes of the person sitting opposite you and understand all the constraints and pressures they're facing. That's essential if you're going to craft a solution that you can both live with. It's not going to be perfect, but it's better than the status quo. That's why you're there. Until you really understand where they're coming from, it's impossible to reach an agreement.

The other thing that diplomacy teaches you is that you're never going to have all the information that you'd like to have to make a decision—especially at the State Department when you're dealing with six-level chessboard kinds of challenges. You're lucky if it's 51/49 for choosing between two options, and there are good arguments on both sides.

You're never going to have perfect intel. And so you're going to have to make a lot of judgment calls, and you're going to have to live with them and then not be consumed by regret if you make a mistake. That helps you become comfortable with making decisions without having perfect knowledge. That's a really important trait for any leader. You can train that skill like a muscle over time.

**Q. How do you hire? What qualities are you looking for in job candidates?**

A. Beyond the table stakes of whether they have the skill set and experience to do the job, I focus on how adaptable they are. After all, most jobs that you hire somebody for are going to be very different a year later. So, I'm looking for those qualities that are going to allow somebody to be successful in new situations. Are they curious? Do they take initiative? Are they flexible? Are they a problem solver? Are they optimistic?

**Q. What is the most common theme that comes up when you are coaching senior leaders?**

A. The most common advice I give them is to be kinder to their employees. Nobody is at their best when they're afraid or fearful—whether it's fearful of not hitting the numbers or not delivering a product, for example. Some people react poorly to stress and try to take it out on others. Oftentimes, these are very good people. It's not a character flaw; it's just the stress that evokes this reaction in them.

So they need to calm down, know that I'm not going to bite their head off, that I'm driving the organization for the next decade rather than the next quarter, and that I've got their back. If they need help, I tell them to please come talk to me or let me find someone who can mentor them.

As I get older, I think that kindness is one of the greatest virtues anybody can have, and there's probably not enough of it in the workplace. It doesn't mean you can't be demanding. It doesn't mean that you can't have high expectations. It's just the way you deal with things. You'll get more out of people if you act with compassion and not anger.



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