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Will to Win: The Key Attribute to Look for | Graham Weaver, Founder & CEO of Alpine Investors

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In this [Art of Leading](#) interview with [The ExCo Group's Adam Bryant](#), [Graham Weaver](#), founder and CEO of [Alpine Investors](#), talks about the need for high-attribute people, the importance of hiring for “the will to win,” and more key leadership insights in this [Art of Leading](#) interview with [The ExCo Group's Adam Bryant](#).

Q. What were important early influences for you?

A. My dad started a business about the time I was born. He was a veterinarian—he worked for another firm and then broke off and started his own. He only handled emergency calls in the middle of the night. His pager would go off at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning, and he would drive to the office to meet a client and treat their pet.

He did that for 30 years, building his practice brick-by-brick. It took a long time, but he ultimately built the largest practice in Toledo, Ohio, where I grew up. I don't think I realized at the time how much that rubbed off on me—you could start from scratch and build something pretty special, but it just took a long time.

When you ask him about it, I think he would say two things. He'd say he ended up building something much bigger than he ever thought possible, and it took him way longer. That would be exactly what I would say about Alpine. It's much larger and more successful than I ever dreamed it could be, and it took way longer than I ever expected.



Another big influence was that I started listening to motivational tapes when I mowed lawns in the summer in Ohio. I listened to people like Tony Robbins, Earl Nightingale, Zig Ziglar, and Brian Tracy. They talked a lot about intention and setting goals and then working backward to achieve them. That had a huge impact because, at the time, my goals were very short-term, like, “Get an A on this test” or “Make this sports team.” So, as I started the practice of achieving bigger goals, that created a lot of positive momentum. It’s become a huge part of my life.



Q. Where does your drive come from?

A. A big motivation for me comes from wanting to see how far I can push anything I’m doing. What are the boundaries of my capabilities? What are the boundaries of my firm’s capabilities? I want to find where the edges are and go all the way there. I did that in athletics, academics, and business. I’ve always been wired that way.

Q. What were some speed bumps in early leadership roles for you?

A. I was 28 when I started my firm. We made every mistake, and that’s not false humility. We had a very bad first fund, and we got flattened when the ’08 recession hit. We were in big trouble and almost went out of business. An “aha moment” for me came when we were right in the middle of the recession. I was so stressed. I was flying all around the country. I was trying to save bank deals and the company.

I worked with my coach, and we did a root-cause analysis. At the bottom of every problem was that we had the wrong person in a role, whether it was the CEO of a portfolio company or a leader in our company. So I’m running around, putting out fires, but I’m not extinguishing the problem, which is that we didn’t have the right people. So that was a huge moment for me, where I realized I was playing the wrong game. Instead, I started to think of ourselves as being in the talent business. That was a huge unlock.

Q. So, how do you hire now?

A. We hire much more for attributes than experience. We found that attributes are much more highly correlated to success, particularly when you have a long time frame. If I had a really experienced person and my time frame is two years, they are probably the right call. If my time frame is ten years, I want a high-attribute person because they’ll pass that high-experience person in 18 months or two years.

The number one attribute we focus on is the will to win—someone who wakes up every day and just wants to win. You meet them, and you know that they’re going to do everything that they can to deliver some kind of outcome. That can come from anywhere. Some of our best CEOs are from the military. They may have never worked a day in business, but they have that quality. We have a woman on our team who is a former ballet dancer, and her will to win is insane.

Then, we’re looking for someone who is coachable because we want someone with a growth mindset. Some of our worst hires have been these really experienced, almost celebrity CEOs, but their cup was full, and they already felt that they knew everything. And you’ve got to have grit because you’re going to get kicked in the teeth. It’s going to take a long time to succeed.

Q. And how do you get at those qualities in an interview?

A. The cornerstone of our process is a structured interview, in which you ask someone to take you from their high school years up to the present day, and you’re looking for data points that show grit, a growth mindset, and a will to win. That interview can take three to five hours, depending on how much experience the candidate has.

Q. What is a “nails on the chalkboard” moment that you might have with a new hire, where they say something that really bothers you?

A. If they’re just describing an event versus being the hero of the story. So nails on a chalkboard, for example, would be a board leader who says to me, “XYZ company missed its numbers. XYZ company did this. The CEO did this.” I don’t care about any of that because I could read that in a report.

What I want to know is, what are you doing about it? The better version of that would be, “Hey, we missed our numbers. Here’s my plan. Here’s what I’m doing. We’re making this change. We’re hiring this person. We’re closing these three deals. We’re doing cost cuts.” That’s what I want to hear. I don’t want the book report. I want the “we’re going to win” report.

Q. What are the most common themes that come up when you coach executives?

A. Number one is that, as the leader of the firm, I’m the one who is setting the bar for what great looks like. If people at the firm are orienting around X, then I’m going to say, “We can do 5X.” So I will ask questions like, “What would need to be true for us to do 5X instead of X?”

That’s the conversation I want to spend all our energy on. Who do we need to hire today to do that? What deals do we need to close? What does the team need to look like? What do we need to acquire to get there? So my biggest coaching is to orient people on a huge outcome and then ask, what are the oak trees we need to plant the seeds of today to hit at goal?



We also have a lot of conversations about talent. If I talk to a CEO about their leadership team, they may start by saying that their CFO is an A player. But then we start drilling down, and by the time we're done, it turns out they are actually a B-. Then, the same thing happens with others on the team.

So, I'm going to push really hard to have a complete team of A players across all the critical functions. The reason is that in 23 years, I've never seen an A player report to a B for any period of time. So, if you have a B head of sales, you have a C sales team. Leaders who are A players hire As, and Bs hire Cs. So you have to have A players in all the key functions.



The third thing we talk about is focus. The best CEOs don't do 20 things; they do three. If you have too many, then your team is going to be all over the place. Everyone thinks, "Well, I'm going to be better if I work on ten things." But you're going to be worse because you're going to have some of your best people working on Priority 7. Let's grab those people and put them on Priority 1. It's that simple. That's why having ten things is so dangerous because you think you're better doing ten things. You're actually way worse.

The last thing we often talk about is pace because a lack of pace is another nails-on-a-chalkboard thing for me—people saying, "I know we said we were going to do that last quarter. We haven't quite done it, but we'll get to it next quarter." I have no tolerance for that because pace is so very highly correlated with success. When I start to see a consistent lack of pace, it's a big red flag.

This interview with [Graham Weaver](#), is part of our [Art of Leading](#) interview series featuring powerful insights from top leaders. [Join the conversation on LinkedIn.](#)

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