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Deborah Bothun's Leadership Lessons | ExCo Insights

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The ExCo Group executive coach and mentor Deborah Bothun, Former Global Lead, Media and Entertainment Practice, PwC, shares her lessons, including the significance of authentic leadership, striving for internal brand cohesion, and other leadership lessons. In this series, we explore some of the most important lessons and insights from our executive coaches and mentors.

KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

In the second half of my consulting career, I learned about the importance of authenticity for me and for the people on my team. And by authenticity I mean having a leadership style that resonated with them. That was not always the case. Earlier in my career, I had often been asked to modify my leadership style to reflect the approach of my superiors and other leaders in the organization, which meant more of a focus on managing to the metrics and goals set forth by the organization. That is important, of course, because we need profitable growth.

But frankly, I found that focus didn't work for me. I needed to have a leadership style that resonated for me, and that I could be passionate about. And so I shifted to more of a focus on being a people leader, first and foremost, and focusing on the growth of my team, which in turn drove growth in the



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business. You can manage to the metrics as you're managing people to help them develop their careers.

That dual track became my focus. It was about finding what was authentic and compelling to my team while working toward the economic metrics. Previously, the choice was made clear to me that if I wanted to rise quickly in the organization, I needed to prioritize hitting the financial targets, sometimes even at a cost to people. The message was that people development was a second or third priority. I made the decision that I would prefer to focus on people, even if it meant that I may not move up as quickly as my peers. What I found when I took the approach I wanted, I rose up far in the organization, and I was very happy with my journey.

Another key lesson for me was the impact that we can have as role models, and the importance of communicating often and in a way that my audience could understand. I learned to recognize that not everybody was going to have the same work style as me, and that I had to focus on how to work with other people in a way that suited them best.

Here's a simple example. I remember being in a meeting with all my direct reports, and I had asked for feedback. My director of marketing raised his hand, and said, "Well, sometimes you work until 11 or 12 o'clock at night, and you send us emails with a note saying that we shouldn't feel compelled to respond. But we do, because we feel like we should support you and work those hours as well." But clearly that was not my intent.

It was a reminder that your actions and your behaviors communicate so much louder than any words. And so I was more explicit about why I was working those hours. I had a young child at the time, and I would have dinner with them, and then get back to the computer to finish up at night.

WHEN I COACH CLIENTS, WE OFTEN TALK ABOUT...

A big challenge my clients have been facing recently is how, and how much, they should communicate with the top leaders in their organization. How much should those conversations be about their impact, their team's impact, and what the top leaders are looking for? Ideally, you would think that all those would be the same, but often they are not, because sometimes the CEO and their leadership team have a longer-term focus than the executives who are one or two levels down and are working on priorities that are more execution focused. And there can be a disconnect at times if the executives I'm working with aren't looking at the whole picture and putting on their CEO hats.

And so I encourage people to think first about the CEO's enterprise-wide objectives, and then to focus on what they can do and frame the conversations around having a positive impact on the overall strategic direction.

Another big theme is that very talented executives often don't realize just how talented they are. In effect, their external brand doesn't match how they are seen inside their own organization. For example, an executive might be a great speaker, and they are appreciated in the marketplace for their insights. But inside their own company, they may not feel so appreciated, and they begin to question their skills and capabilities.

So I work with them on sharpening their internal brand. And when you have a brand that is cohesive and aligned in terms of how you are perceived externally and internally, and also with your skills and passions, that's when you succeed by having real impact. That's the trifecta.