



Duriya Farooqui

Former President Georgia Pacific, Director IHG; NYSE; ICE

Duriya Farooqui's Leadership Lessons | ExCo Insights

April 1, 2024

In this series, we explore some of the most important lessons and insights from our executive coaches and mentors. The ExCo Group executive coach and mentor Duriya Farooqui, Former President Georgia Pacific, and Director IHG; NYSE; ICE, shares her lessons, including the importance of raising your hand, dealing with imposter syndrome, and more leadership insights.

KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

I learned early in my career that it's important to raise your hand and put skin in the game. I was 35 years old, and I was deputy chief operating officer of Atlanta. I was expecting to get the COO job that was opening because I had proven myself. Then, a peer, a mentor and friend of mine, took me out to drinks and said, "I think you have to ask for it." I asked why. After all, I was an idealistic young leader; I believed in meritocracy, and I was expecting to be asked to do the job if they considered me the best candidate for it. And she told me, "You have to tell the mayor that this is what you want."

That conversation made a difference, and I did more than ask. Soon after, I walked into the mayor's office and said, "I want to be a chief operating officer, and if you appoint me. I will make sure you never regret it." I got the job, and the leadership lesson was that strong leaders never shy away from taking on accountability. They lean into it.



People often undersell themselves, which is a trait that women, in particular, tend to have as leaders.

Another big leadership lesson for me was around the idea that people often undersell themselves, which is a trait that women, in particular, tend to have as leaders. When I was leading the Atlanta Committee for Progress and shy of turning 40, the CEO of a big Fortune 500 financial services company called me and asked if I would be interested in serving on his board of directors. I had never pursued an opportunity to be a director before, and I had never thought of myself as even a candidate for board roles. I told him, “Look, I think your company is fantastic. But I want to remind you I’m not from financial services. I’ve not been a corporate CEO. I’m not sure I’m qualified.” And he said to me, “You have run a city with a \$2 billion-plus budget. As a consultant, you have advised Fortune 500 companies on their growth strategies and everything in between. And now you are running an organization with 40 CEOs on its board. I’m pretty sure you’re qualified.”

I’ve never forgotten the power of that moment because everything he said was true. But I would have never strung my qualifications together that way to position myself for an opportunity to serve on a company board. It’s a reminder of how important it is to have someone who can say to you, “I can see you doing that.” Because imposter syndrome is real and pervasive, particularly when you don’t see someone like yourself in the seat.

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

I always tell my clients, “You’ll be voted into your next job.” And what I mean is that your peers need to want to work for you. As people are moving up to become enterprise leaders, they oftentimes don’t realize that followership is not just about managing up and down. It’s also very much about developing followership from your peers. You can get to a certain point as a strong functional leader, but stepping up to the role of a real enterprise leader requires a different kind of influence, intention, muscle, and capability. It means collaborating with your peers meaningfully so that when the day comes to elevate someone from the team, they want it to be you. A good way to do that is to start demonstrating that you know how to solve problems beyond your own business and by working with your peers to drive value and the growth of the enterprise. Comfort in interacting with a board, executive presence, and driving consensus on strategy are key skills to lean into.

Another theme that comes up often is helping them to be more aware of how they are perceived in their organization and how consequential those perceptions can be to their long-term career opportunities. And so I always tell clients that my job is to figure out what’s “written on their back.” They already have lots of feedback from performance reviews and 360s. But the reality is their colleagues will have less nuanced perceptions of their leadership potential, which are, in effect, the key hurdles to overcome. Perception is reality and is often not clear in performance reviews. You have to know how people perceive you so you can work on changing the perceptions that might be holding you back from getting the next opportunity. And the qualities that people have are often two sides of the same coin. Being confident and hard-charging can be both a strength and a weakness, depending on the context and how people perceive you. So, how do you become more aware of those perceptions, and what can you do to evolve your leadership strengths and style to shift those perceptions?