



# Nina Link's Leadership Lessons

## | ExCo Insights

February 26, 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 Nina Link, Former CEO MPA - The Association of Magazine Media, shares her lessons, including her ability to fill the shoes of a leader, the importance of resilience, and other leadership lessons.

### KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

“Fill your shoes.” It was a big lesson for me when I became president and CEO of the Association of Magazine Media. I had 40 board members, all of whom were CEOs of their publishing companies. And although I knew them and had worked with them when I took over that role, the relationship shifted. One of the first things I did was to hold a two-day offsite, and I hired a facilitator to run the retreat. It went well, and everyone was very engaged. I felt good about the experience, but the facilitator came back a couple of weeks later to debrief, and he said to me, “Why weren’t you part of the discussion?” I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “I didn’t really hear your voice very much. It was a great agenda, but you didn’t have a seat at the table.”

And that stunned me at first. But as I thought about it, I realized that I had been somewhat intimidated, and I had acted as more of an observer. But that was not going to work in this new role, and it really forced me to think about how to develop my confidence and how to connect with the board members in a way so that I filled a seat at the table. They were all very verbal, confident and decisive. But I worked hard to build relationships with each of them and found ways to give myself greater visibility. It took a while, but I got there.

Another key lesson was, don't fall in love with your new project or business. I was working at Sesame Workshop, where I did a lot of new product development. The work was thrilling, and I saw an opportunity for us to enter a new market, the school market, by delivering monthly multi-media modules based on a pre-school through 1st grade curriculum. I hired a company to do research. We built out a business plan, and I got funding from upper management and the board to launch the business. But with each step we took, there were warning signs. Even so, I loved the project and I really wanted it to happen. So I kept pushing through each milestone in the testing phase, and we ultimately launched it to great expense. But it became quite clear that it was not going to succeed. It was a very difficult and expensive lesson. It taught me a lot about navigating gray areas, and that you have to set your markers. And if you don't hit them, you have to either know why and pivot and test again, or realize that you have to abandon the project, as much as you may love it. I took that lesson to everything that I've ever launched since. You have to be objective.



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

The most common theme has been moving from being the doer to being a leader. It can be very hard to give up or pivot from the work that you've excelled at for years, to then realize that being a leader involves people issues to a surprising degree. And you have to create followership.

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So you have to make time to develop your people, and develop relationships with them, because ultimately you are only as good as the people you're surrounded by. It's a very tough slog to try to do it on your own.

As part of that conversation, I do a lot of work with clients to understand their team and their network of stakeholders—the strength of their relationships with them, what they need from those stakeholders and what the stakeholders need from my client, and how they should be interacting. And I remind them about the power of small moments, like the quick conversation after a meeting to show how much you appreciate some specific contribution that somebody made. You should always try to find those unscripted moments to show that you're a person who cares.

Another common theme is the importance of resilience. With so much disruption in business and the speed of change and new technologies, there are leaders who are really struggling to meet the moment. Part of the challenge of adapting to change is letting go of some legacy approaches to pivot forward. It's very challenging to be able to scan the horizon and find a path to the future. They may have taken some risks that didn't work. But there are leaders who can pick themselves up and show confidence, even when there is a lot of uncertainty, that they and their teams will find the right path forward. Resilience is a team sport.

You can't do it just by yourself. You need to find those people who can work with you and for you to keep pressing ahead. It's about those moments when you look yourself in the mirror and say, "Can I do this?" And then you pick yourself and keep going, knowing it's going to be tough.