



# Robby Swinnen's Leadership Lessons

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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 Robby Swinnen, Former President Intel Asia, shares his lessons, including refining your leadership brand, facing “Un-headwinds”, and creating feedback mechanisms.

### KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

I learned the most about myself and my leadership mettle when things were not going my way. I was sitting in what was, in effect, the executive “penalty box” for doing what I thought was the right thing. I had brought to light a code of conduct infraction that I saw at the company where I worked. It was a red flag for my own leadership value of conducting business with uncompromising integrity, but the leadership at the time decided to look the other way. I was working in a market outside the United States, and I asked to be repatriated as soon as possible because I could not operate in that kind of environment. So, I came back to the U.S., and I was put into a holding-pattern role that was significantly smaller than my previous job. That lasted for about two years, and it had a massive impact on my trajectory in the company.

What I learned is that in leadership and in your career, you will face headwinds that I like to call “un-headwinds.” Something might happen that is unfair, undeserved, unethical, unexpected, or fill in your own “un-.” These headwinds provide learning opportunities for you, and they are also big markers for your leadership brand. I found that my values got tested when I’ve been in pressure situations. It’s in those moments that you decide what your non-negotiable leadership values are.

Going through that myself also helped me see when others were in the penalty box because of a situation in which they took a stand. The penalty box is a very lonely place, so I made a point of reaching out to those people. It’s not that I expected to help them resolve their issue, but I wanted to let them know I was there for them. And those relationships turned out to be lasting relationships because of the bonds that were formed under pressure.

Another leadership lesson I learned is the importance of understanding the conversation about you when you’re not in the room. In other words, what is your leadership brand? As you progress through your career, there are going to be meetings—that you’re not part of—where people are discussing your next assignment, whether to join your team, or whether to nominate you for an accelerated leadership program.

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In my own career, I was very lucky because I was seen as a natural leader, able to galvanize people around a common purpose, whether it was in sports, the military, or in business. As I moved up into more senior leadership roles, I realized that at those higher levels, leaders need to have a certain level of predictability in their behavior. It’s important because people can’t see you all the time, but they should have a sense of what you’re likely to think, say, and do in all the highly ambiguous situations that teams face, particularly in the last few years. People put their trust in you, and they need to know your personal leadership values, in addition to the fact that you’re living up to the company’s values.

Part of refining your leadership brand is that you need to create a feedback mechanism because often, the way you think you are showing up and the way people are perceiving you are not always aligned. Part of your journey as a leader is to try to make sure those are as tightly aligned as possible. So, you need people in your network who can give you direct feedback about whether you are living your values.

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

One theme is part of the transformation process many companies are going through, particularly ones that require a large reduction in force. I often see a lack of synchronization when difficult organizational changes are happening. The leadership team knows that there is a big change coming, and they’re looking at the strategic implications of that change and how they’re operationalizing it. In general, the leadership team has a couple of months prior to the actual announcement of the changes, and that gives them time to work through whatever emotions they have around it. And that may include anger and disappointment before they get to acceptance. We all have to go through these phases of change, which are highly individual, including how long they take.

And so this is where the synchronization gap comes in because, by the time the leaders announce the news to the broader organization, they have already dealt with most of it emotionally, while everyone else is just starting to grapple with it. That creates a gap because the leader is ready to move and implement the change and see the optimistic scenario, whereas the organization is not there yet. And so I tell clients that they must be mindful of that gap and be patiently impatient and empathetic as the rest of the organization comes to terms with the changes. They also have to fine-tune their messaging to be highly respectful of the past, realistic about the current situation that requires transformation, and super-optimistic about the future.

Another topic that has come up more often in the last few years, with all the new pressures on leaders, is that people are starting to reflect more on what they are going to do when they step away from their corporate careers to start the next chapter of their lives. Everybody is going to have a last day in the office, and so you have to think about that moment and what comes after it in three different dimensions.

The first one is that you want to make sure that the organization continues to thrive when you are not part of the leadership team anymore. Part of that includes the formal and informal steps to prepare your successor better.

The second one is how you prepare yourself for when you are no longer a senior executive because that means a massive change in your identity and your persona. You have to think through your purpose for the years ahead. What are the passions you want to explore in your next chapter? That might include engaging with boards or helping to teach the next generation of leaders.

The last one is how you prepare the system you are operating in to be ready for the day when you are not the CEO or senior leader of a company anymore. And that “system” includes the people closest to you, including your family and spouse or partner. Because there will be an adjustment period with you being around much more instead of working 60- to 80-hour weeks, including weekends, and it takes a really mindful approach.