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Shellye Archambeau'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 Shellye Archambeau, Board Director Verizon, Roper Technologies, and Okta, shares her lessons, including her team influence approach, matching goals to overall priorities, and other leadership lessons.

KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

The biggest leadership lesson for me was that being a manager is a title, but you can only become a leader if your team chooses to follow you. I learned this when I was a senior manager, and my boss was a junior executive. We had been working for a few months on an entirely new business plan that, if it were approved, would have meant a big increase in our budget and a whole new way of doing business. The day finally came for him to present the plan to his boss, and we were all waiting in the conference room to hear the decision.

He came in and said that his boss let us down, and that we weren't going to get the money. His words and body language created a lot of negativity in the room, and people were complaining about the time they wasted on the new plan. I realized he wasn't leading us at that moment, and I still had plans and aspirations. So I stepped forward and said, "Wait a minute. We didn't get a budget cut. We just didn't get a budget increase. So let's figure out what we're going to do." That shifted the mood, and

then he finally stepped in and took us forward. But in that moment, I realized that anyone can be a leader, no matter what their role is. Leadership is about being able to create environment in which people want to follow you in good times and in really challenging times. That is a skill, and it takes intention and practice.



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My second leadership lesson is to control your calendar and make sure that it matches your priorities. I was a mid-level manager the first time I heard this advice, and I remember thinking, “What do you mean? Everybody else controls my calendar. My boss sets meetings. We have staff meetings. How am I supposed to control my calendar?” I thought it was ridiculous advice because I wasn’t in a position of control. And what I’ve realized over time is that people have more control than they may think. Yes, there are meetings that are set by other people. But you have a lot of influence over what meetings you accept and how much time you allocate to them. When I realized the importance of that message, I started looking back to see whether the way I was spending my time matched my priorities. What I learned was that it wasn’t. I was really good at doing what everybody else wanted me to get done. But I really wasn’t great at allocating time to my priorities. So when a meeting request came in, I started being much more intentional about whether the request fit with my priorities, and whether I could delegate the meeting or work to someone else. To this day, I always review my calendar on a quarterly basis to check whether it matches my goals and overall priorities.

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

One theme that comes up often is the importance of creating inspiration. Many leaders are very good at articulating what they need to do for the business, such as driving revenue and improving customer satisfaction. But one area where they can often improve is being able to drive an emotional connection to why something needs to be done. And that typically means connecting how the work you’re doing benefits your customers and clients.

Another common theme is the importance of driving clarity. Because without that clarity, people will come to their own conclusions about what’s important and how to set their own priorities. Many people are hesitant to ask clarifying questions about the strategy, and so that disconnect can make leaders feel that employees are not listening. So as a leader, it is important to ensure that you are extremely clear when you are setting strategy, priorities and objectives. And then ask clarifying questions that are specific to what you just shared, such as, “Does everybody understand the top three things that we need to do in the next 30 days?” That gives people a chance to ask for more clarity if they don’t have it. If leaders are clear, that enables the entire organization to make decisions every day that are consistent with the strategies, goals and objectives.

Another way to ensure the strategy is clear is to test it. You don’t have to put your strategy together in a vacuum, and then unleash it to the entire organization all at once. You can share it with a few people on your team or your own personal board of directors or advisors. It’s just like marketing. You would never launch a product into the marketplace without testing it first. Launching a strategy is like launching a product, and you should think about it the same way.