



# George Napier's Leadership Lessons | ExCo Insights

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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 George Napier, Former President/CEO Wilson Sporting Goods Co.; Meridian Sports; RockShox; Benetton Sportssystem; Prince Sports, shares his lessons on the power of driving change with followership, establishing trust, and other leadership lessons.

## KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

When I first became a leader and for several years after, I was focused entirely on results—the only thing that mattered was that I delivered what I said I was going to deliver. What I learned over time was how you deliver those results is just as important. Driving change with followership is so much more powerful than just getting results. How you bring people along, how you listen to them, engage with them and let them know they're making real contributions is super-important and brings multiple long-term benefits.

I learned that lesson when I was asked to take over the U.S. business of a global company. I made a lot of changes in the way we ran the business, and we accomplished some remarkable results in a

short period of time. But I realized at the end of that process that I may have had half a friend at the company, and that a lot of people weren't that upset when I left. So for the rest of my career, I made a point of getting people on board and making sure they bought into the vision and helped shape it.

Another lesson is about the problem of delaying making decisions. I've seen this with clients, and I saw it in myself early on. You move into a new role, and you don't know enough and you don't have the answers. So you start delaying making decisions until you have more information, and you end up slowing everything down. That's disruptive, and you get in the way of people being able to do their jobs.

What you need to do is be open-minded, be clear about what you're trying to accomplish, ask people for help, and figure out the right questions to ask. What are the options we have? What are the risks if we do this or that? What are the challenges? What are the likely timelines of different approaches? Then you can make the right decision based on a few important bits of information and adjust quickly if you need to. You need to learn what the right answer is when you hear it. But you don't need to know everything. This approach also helps people on your team understand how important they are.



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

One common theme is the lack of trust among colleagues, and how that can prevent you from moving forward at the speed you need to move. So we talk about how to establish and build trust, because it comes so slowly and it can go away so quickly. Leaders need to be mindful about the importance of trust, because it is often the pivot point on why the organization is not doing better. And when there is a lack of trust, usually it's because people are suspicious about others' motives, and whether they have side agendas in which they are looking out more for themselves than the team. Without trust, people hold back and they don't support initiatives.

For leaders to build trust and followership, they need to be up front and let people know who they are, including their values, goals and motives. And if there is a trust problem between a couple of colleagues, you have to address it. You need to have

the hard conversation and address the underlying problem. You can't just hope it goes away. Those can be tricky conversations to navigate, but when you narrow it down to something specific, they often can work through it, especially when you tell them that it's getting in the way of the team's performance.

Another big theme is about how to scale effectively. We talk about the importance of picking the right priorities, working on the stuff that matters, and delegating effectively. You need a process for sharpening your list of priorities, because many companies have a "top 10," and those aren't priorities. That's a list. You shouldn't have more than three priorities.

To help with that discussion, we might use a 2x2 grid to figure out what's both urgent and important. Another tool I like to use is the 2x2 grid for impact and ease of implementation, because ideally you

want to score quick wins that will make a difference. Ultimately, it's about how they are allocating their time, because I find plenty of leaders spending time on things that aren't productive. And if you are going to delegate work to others, you can't just relegate or abdicate. You have to sit down with the person, and make sure they understand what you're trying to accomplish, why you're picking them to handle it, and how you want to stay involved. A lot of people don't do that. They think delegation is just giving a task or project to someone, and then they get upset when it isn't done exactly the way they expect. If you pick your priorities correctly and delegate well, then you have a good chance of scaling well.