



# Mark Gumz's Leadership Lessons | ExCo Insights

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In this series, we explore insights from our executive coaches and mentors. Mark Gumz, an executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group and Former President and CEO Olympus Corporation of the Americas, shares his valuable lessons. These include the importance of listening first and speaking last, the value of relationships, and other leadership insights.

### KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

Early on in my career, I had a tendency in meetings to quickly give a response or answer. I learned over time about the importance of listening first and speaking last. Otherwise, if you talk too much, you're not really listening to what others are saying. And when a decision is made based on the conversation in that meeting, it's likely that some of the people who didn't agree with you or had a different opinion might say to themselves, "Well, he or she never listened," and then not be supportive of the final decision. I encourage people to try to become a "power listener." That means being patient, being appropriately quiet, listening carefully to what others are saying and then interpreting what they said to drive a substantive conversation.

A second key lesson that I learned is that if you have an issue with someone, talk directly to that person. I often see a tendency to avoid those conversations, even with people who are far along in their careers. They may have an issue that's bothering them about someone they're working with, and yet

they don't share it with them. It's part of being an authentic leader. Sometimes you have to say things that might take people back. But you shouldn't share it with somebody else. Share it directly with the person you're working with who needs to hear it.

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

I encourage my clients to work on their relationship with their HR business partner, whoever that may be in the organization. The reason is that you really want to have them on your side, to help enable the things you want to accomplish. After all, the single biggest line item in any organization is pay-roll. The question becomes, what are we doing to maximize the return from that investment? Part of the answer is how we work together with human resources on developing people, evaluating talent, planning for succession, and understanding what employees want. Especially during this post-Covid

period, employees are a vocal stakeholder group that really needs to be listened to. As a leader, you want to have a good relationship with your HR business partner and ensure that you are both listening closely to employees. The war for talent is constant and will continue. What are you going to do to be an employer of choice?



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Another theme that comes up starts with the fact our clients have already built a track record of success over the first 20 to 25 years in their careers, whether it's by launching new products or services, or achieving certain financial targets. But the skills they used to get where they are now are not necessarily the ones they will need as they move into bigger leadership roles. A key driver of their success in those roles is going to be the relationships that they build.

How well do you play on teams where you are not in charge? How good are you at building and nurturing relationships with others across the organization? One of the things I highly encourage is to reach out to those people not just in meetings but also outside of the meetings. Because of all the interdependencies in big companies, and most have matrixed organizations, your success is going to depend on others helping you and you helping them. That's closely related to how you will be perceived longer-term to become a leader of leaders. The only way you're going to have followership is if people feel that you truly believe that relationships are important.

A third topic that comes up often is the importance of speaking truth to power. Leaders depend upon the people they're leading to help them bring issues to light. And so, you have to have the courage to raise those issues. That may be uncomfortable. In fact, the leader may not want to hear it. But it's the right thing to do. The same is true when you are the leader, and someone comes to you to speak truth to power. How do you react? I encourage my clients to acknowledge the importance of what the person did, the courage it took, and how much you appreciate what they've shared with you. Honesty, ethics, and authenticity are all critical in leadership; speaking truth to power is part of that.