



Ty Seidule's Leadership Lessons | ExCo Insights

March 6, 2024

“History changed me.” This series explores some of our executive coaches’ and mentors’ most important lessons and insights. Executive coach and senior advisor to The ExCo Group Ty Seidule shares his lessons, including the importance of understanding your company’s history, the responsibility of majority groups in racial equity, and more leadership insights.

Q. At first glance, people might think, “Ty, you’re a professor of history and a white male. What can you bring to the conversation about the modern-day diversity, equity, and inclusion challenges?”

A. The first thing I would say is, why not me? If diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts are going to work, they need more than just underrepresented people to help drive these conversations. It takes people who are from the majority. It takes the full team.

My story is that I started out not understanding why we had so few underrepresented minorities in the institution I was working in: West Point. And so I started researching the history of West Point, and in the process, I became the expert on the history of the Black experience at West Point simply because nobody else had ever done it. And that research led me time and again to stories that I had never heard about before, which in turn helped me see my own story in a different light.

My story starts with being raised as a white Southerner. I went to segregated schools. I went to Washington & Lee University because I wanted to be an educated Christian gentleman. But I changed because I no longer wanted to be a Southern gentleman. I wanted to be an Army officer. Learning more about history taught me that my culture told lies. And learning that history changed me in the process. So, I started sharing my own story—of growing up a white Southerner and the lies that were created to further white political power at the expense of Black people. By telling my story, I think I can help others realize that you can't change anything until you change your own story and have your own narrative about why this is important.

Q. What were some key insights for you?

A. I discovered that my hometown of Alexandria, VA, used to be part of the District of Columbia. It's not anymore because it retroceded back to Virginia to protect the slave trade. I didn't realize that my hometown was the site of a number of lynchings. I didn't realize that my hometown of Alexandria has more streets named after Confederates than any other.

I didn't know any of this because I read about all of my heroes—Robert E. Lee, in particular—through my textbooks and the books that were given to me as a child. And then, when I realized that so many monuments were built to support white supremacy, I couldn't believe that I grew up with these lies and that I believed them for so long.

So, there was some guilt on my own part. As I did more research, I realized how much of my early life was threaded through with Confederate memorialization and white supremacy. That led me to look for new heroes, and I found them, including African American lawyers in Alexandria and Black cadets at West Point. As my conception of history changed, my conception of myself changed. And when my conception of myself changed, I could help change others by using my own story.

Q. When you speak with audiences, what facts do you share that help shed light on the history of racism in this country?

A. I tell them about the history of why Black families have one-tenth the wealth of white families in this country. I found and read the Congressional testimony that explained that one of the reasons Black people were excluded from Social Security in the 1930s was because the South was a one-party racial police state controlled at the time by the Democrats. And the only way they would pass Social Security was if laborers, farmers, and domestics were excluded. So, white people were able to start building up generational wealth while Black people were excluded from that system. You can't change policies until you understand the history of them.

I tell audiences that learning about this uncomfortable history does not mean that you dislike your country. I served in uniform for nearly 40 years. I love my country, but you can't love it unless you want to improve it. And people need to understand that Confederates killed US Army soldiers to create a slave republic that included rape and separating families. Americans can handle the truth. We can handle a bit of uncomfortable history, and by doing that, we get closer to empathy. And when we become empathetic, we can change to ensure that others have the same opportunities I did growing up.

Q. Can you talk a bit more about the importance of empathy?

A. If I'm going to be empathetic, I've got to be able to walk in the shoes of those in my organization, the people I lead. And I can't do that without understanding history. In the military, I need to know that there were 0.2 percent Black officers in the US Navy and the US Marine Corps through the 1960s. I need to understand what it was like for those African American cadets at West Point who were silenced, who no one would talk to. And once I understand what that experience was like through research, I can have more empathy for those coming after me.

When I was at West Point, I was the mentor for what was, in effect, the Black Student Union. It's natural to think, how could this white guy be that? But I'm the one who had studied the history of the Black experience at West Point, so I would talk to them every year about that. I mentored Black officers,

and I changed how we taught history at West Point to ensure that we were studying African American history and the history of women in the military. Being more empathetic to those experiences changed me, which made me want to change the organization. In fact, I couldn't help but do it because it was morally right, and it made us a better place to work and more efficient in our mission.

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Q. In the last few years, particularly after the murder of George Floyd, we saw a widespread commitment by organizations to do more and do better in terms of DE&I efforts. And yet, we are also seeing evidence of that commitment waning. Can you set this current period in the broader context of history?

A. Three events really changed the country in the last decade. In 2015, nine Black churchgoers in Charleston were slaughtered by a White supremacist. Then, there was the 2017 Unite the Right violence in Charlottesville. And then George Floyd was murdered in 2020. Together, they led to this movement in the summer of 2020 toward greater equality.

But every time there has been a move toward greater equality in American history, there is always the counterrevolution. It happened after Reconstruction, with the first Civil Rights Act and the 14th Amendment guaranteeing equal protection under the law. Jim Crow segregation came after that. The same thing happened after the Civil Rights Movement with white flight and segregation academies. We had Obama's presidency and the Tea Party's reaction to that. And we're seeing the same dynamic now.

Remember, we are a majority white country, and so these things will happen, but there will be another event that will move us toward greater equality. But I don't believe in the idea that there is a moral arc of justice. It won't happen unless people fight for it. As long as we have the problem of race in America, we're going to have these competing movements—one toward equal rights and the other counter to that—which will continue on, just as they have throughout American history.

We have made progress in my lifetime. I was bussed across town during the integration era in Alexandria, Virginia, from the white elementary school—named Douglas MacArthur—to the segregated all-Black school named Robert E. Lee Elementary School. And there were bomb threats daily. I go back to Alexandria now, and it is a very different city. We are a much more diverse nation but still

have these longstanding problems. So, I believe in this country, and I am optimistic that this country will figure out a way forward. But I know it doesn't have to go that way. Progress is not assured unless we work toward that. We need people to continue the fight to ensure that this country lives up to its original founding documents of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

Q. When you speak to businesses, how do you connect your story to what they can do to support their DE&I efforts?

A. I use my own example of not knowing the history of my organization and then how the experience of learning changed me. And so I encourage people to understand their company's history a bit more. What was the percentage of underrepresented minorities in the company in its early years? If it's an older company, patterns will emerge there. Often, there are some positives. We've come a long way, but you can also see where you need to go further. How does your company and your industry do that? The evidence is pretty clear that more diverse teams make better decisions.

Remember that the military is the most diverse workforce in the country, and we just changed the name of a base in Virginia that used to be named Fort Lee to Fort Gregg-Adams, named after two African American officers stationed there at different times. The change that occurred just from that ceremony was absolutely amazing. That's an example of how changing your symbols and changing the stories you tell can help your company be more effective in delivering on its mission while being better for your employees.

Q. The topic of race remains an uncomfortable conversation for so many people. What's your advice for people who want to have those discussions but may not know how to start them?

A. You should trust your instincts and start by asking questions. That's certainly what I started doing. I asked questions of my colleagues. I asked questions of the cadets who were at West Point. I also tried to find answers to my questions in books and archives. This is about understanding the human condition.

Is it complicated? Yes. But it's so worth it to connect to your fellow human beings. The joy in this for me is to share my story with audiences. And my story starts out with me being a racist and how learning history changed me. I find that every type of audience responds positively to that. It shows your willingness to engage honestly with audiences. So if you're honest about what you're feeling—including that you don't know how to start this conversation—that's a fine place to start.