



### **Barbara Khouri**

Former Deputy CEO & President (U.S.) of Swatch

## **Barbara Khouri 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 Barbara Khouri, former Deputy CEO & President (U.S.) of Swatch, shares her lessons, highlighting the significance of owning the responsibility for your actions, the impact of empathy, and the importance of breaking down silos.

### **KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS**

I learned early on that I had to take full ownership and responsibility and accountability for everything I did. And that sense of ownership gets even more expansive the higher you go in terms of leadership. I learned that when I was hired by a private equity firm to run a company. I was fully in charge. I was the one ultimately making the decisions. It can be a bit overwhelming, and it is lonely at the top. The company is really your key stakeholder, and therefore anything and everything you do has to be for the enterprise.

I do bless my parents every day for giving me a sense of bone-deep self confidence that gives me the ability to dive into challenges and to own the responsibility rather than shirking it. It's part of my DNA, and helps explain why I put myself into incredibly stressful situations, like the many turnarounds I've

managed. There were moments when I didn't know if I would be able to pay the payroll that week. After a lot of soul-searching and work around self-awareness, it comes down to the simple fact that I like to fix things, make them better, and help people.

Another key leadership lesson for me is around the idea of empathy. People can get trapped in their silos at work, and overly focused on driving business performance, without caring so much about leading with empathy. They should marry the two because they enhance each other. Just because I'm empathetic doesn't mean that I'm not going to run the business as effectively and efficiently and professionally as I possibly can. Obviously, I want to grow the business. But there's no reason why empathy can't enhance that experience.

I don't make excuses for smiling and laughing and joking with people, because I know when we have to get to the tough business, we will do that. The importance of empathy was really driven home for me when I did my first turnaround, and I needed the people on my team to stay. I would use humor and be humble when appropriate, including owning up to the fact that I might have made a bad decision.

And I would tell people to leave the office so they wouldn't miss the train for their long commute home. I wanted people to feel comfortable in that environment. You have to show that you care about them personally, and only then can you challenge them directly. That helped us become a team in the truest sense of the word.



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

The idea of bone-deep self-confidence that I mentioned earlier is a big topic. I will ask them about their personal life over the years, and listen for anything that might be creating a derailer for them at work by undermining their confidence. Because they need confidence, in addition to adaptability and agility, to be successful. That's what makes for good leaders. Confidence provides so many things. You can be humble. You can be self-deprecating.

You can hire the best people because you're not threatened by them. It gives you the courage to state your point of view, and to encourage others to share their opinions.

I know a lot of people have imposter syndrome. And there's no magic dust to create confidence. Part of it comes from working through those things that happened earlier in their lives that might be holding them back. I'm not a psychiatrist, and I wouldn't profess to be. But you can often tell when people are uncomfortable about something, so I will address it and then try to link it to what happens in their business life, because you can't separate the personal from the business, as much as we might try. I also will often read their resume back to them to remind them of all they have accomplished in their career already.

Another theme that comes up often is the importance of breaking down silos, and communicating and collaborating across the organization. Building true relationships is so important to me. Don't just go to somebody when you need something from them. Look for ways to help others. That builds trust, which is so essential for creating a strong culture of teamwork.

Finally, I often talk about the importance of being a good role model. That means being your authentic self, showing consistent behavior, and being calm in the face of challenges. People are watching you, and they want to know that you are calm and confident. Leaders, particularly the CEO, often don't realize the exponential effect that they have on the company just from how they carry themselves.