



Phil Rudolph'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. Phil Rudolph, The ExCo Group executive coach and mentor and former Executive Vice President of Jack in the Box Inc., imparts invaluable wisdom, highlighting the significance of being yourself and not playing a role, embracing empathy, and fostering trust by relying on those around you.

KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

First, be yourself and don't play a role. This may seem self-evident, but I've seen too many people get tripped up trying to be what they thought their stakeholders wanted them to be. Leadership is hard enough without trying to be someone you're not.

I learned this lesson mainly by watching other people make this mistake. But it's meant a lot to me over the years to work with leaders who have encouraged me to be true to who I am and who, as a result, helped me become a more effective leader. Because of my own experiences and observations over the years, this topic has become an important part of my work with rising executives.

The second key lesson is about the importance of embracing empathy in ways both big and small. The small ways include getting to know the people you're working with or who are working for you. It

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means taking an interest in who they are, understanding what drives them, what makes them good at their jobs, and where their weaknesses are so that you can be effective at maximizing what they're good at and helping them build the muscles they need to build. I've found that leaders who lack this type of empathy are not particularly effective.

It has been far more gratifying for me to get to know the people I'm working with on a personal level. Some people believe you shouldn't become friends with subordinates, but I don't believe this. You have to strike a balance, but the point is that if I don't know and truly care about who these people are, then I won't know what's driving them personally and professionally, and I can't help them become better leaders or be as fulfilled in their roles as they can and should be.

The macro version of embracing empathy is at a strategic level, and it means that we as leaders have to be conscious and mindful of what our stakeholders—including our customers, employees, and suppliers—want and need from us. You don't have to agree with them or do everything they want, but if you are meeting them where they are, they are much more inclined to want to do business with you than if you are trying to tell them what they should want. It's a lesson I've learned from witnessing the ineffectiveness of leaders who appeared and acted indifferent to the expectations of the broader stakeholder community.

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

I work with people who report to C-suite executives, so they are one level below the most senior leadership team. One topic that comes up often is the importance of surrounding yourself with the right talent and trusting those people to do their jobs. It's the delegation conversation, and it's crucial for new leaders to understand and embrace its importance to their success.

Moving into a new role can bring out insecurities, and the easiest way to stop feeling insecure is to revert to doing what you're most comfortable doing. But you can't do that; you've got people to do that work for you now, and you're not being paid to do what you always did. You're being paid to focus on the bigger picture. It's like a trust fall—you've got to be able to rely on the people around you to "catch you"—in other words, to do what needs to be done at their level so you can focus on the more strategic challenges that are the highest and best use of your own time. This underscores the importance of building the right team and trusting the members of that team to do their jobs.

Another big theme, which is related to the one I just mentioned, is about the importance of being self-aware. And that includes being vulnerable enough to acknowledge that you can't do everything and that you need to surround yourself with people who will help fill those gaps. Nobody is demanding or expecting that you be good at everything. Sometimes, people think they must be able to do everything when moving into a leadership role. That's not the case. Leadership involves understanding and maximizing your strengths, recognizing weaknesses, and surrounding yourself with people who are great at what you're not great at. If you think you're showing weakness by demonstrating vulnerability, you do a disservice to yourself, your team, and the broader organization.