



Cameron Byers'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 Cameron Byers, former CEO of BP Energy Co. NA, shares his lessons, including the impact of a CEO's position, working through differences, and required behavioral changes for leaders.

KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

The first lesson is, don't underestimate your position's impact on people. When I was first appointed CEO, I heard commentary that I apparently was showing favoritism. When I talked to people on my team, they shared that I was still socializing quite a bit with the people who had been my peers before I became CEO. I didn't realize that was being interpreted as favoritism. That taught me that you have to be very conscious and aware of how you show up—how you present yourself, communicate, and socialize. Everything you say and do becomes exponentially magnified.

Another lesson came around building trust when you start working with a new team. When you communicate certain instructions or directions in those first weeks and months, it's important to consistently confirm that people understand what you're saying. Because if they don't have that trust in you, or they don't know you, they will hesitate to ask questions to validate their understanding. So that responsibility—to repeat and validate—is yours.

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A third lesson I learned early on, through a somewhat painful experience, was the importance of nurturing peer relationships. When I was the chief operating officer of a business, the CFO and I struggled to understand each other's roles. For example, I took umbrage at the fact that he constantly talked to my direct reports, which I felt was an overreach. I got somewhat defensive, and the tension built over time, to the point that the CEO told us to go into a room and not come out until we had worked through our differences.

It turns out I had made some wrong assumptions about his motivations. I had thought he was looking for information to give him some advantage as he was competing with me on the leadership team. I explained this to him, and he shared that that was not his motivation at all. Instead, he believed that I didn't have

a good opinion of his finance team and that they weren't doing their job. And so he was talking to my people to better understand what the problems were. He was trying to be supportive, and he had the wrong impression of what I had thought of his team. The two of us worked very well together after that meeting.

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

One pattern I've seen is when people shift from a functional leader role, or the head of a particular business unit, to becoming an enterprise leader. That new role requires more holistic thinking, but sometimes I see clients struggling with that transition, specifically in two areas.

One is balancing long-term, strategic, and visionary thinking while executing on shorter-term imperatives. And the latter can easily become the default because those are the familiar muscles people have used for so long. That is why it's so important for people to build the strongest team they possibly can below them. Otherwise, they will struggle to elevate themselves to a place where they can have the time and capacity to focus on the long-term and the short-term. That can require some courage, too, because they may have to make tough decisions about whether former peers will stay on their teams.

The other aspect of this shift to more of an enterprise leader is the behavioral change that's required, particularly in how they show up as a peer on their leadership teams. They may say to themselves, "I only know my function, so what role can I possibly play in debates about the future of the enterprise?" I tell them, "You don't have to understand others' subject matter as well as them. You just have to know the right questions to ask about the company's strategy and culture. You have to understand that you have the permission to do so and the responsibility." This is another reminder of the importance of stakeholder management. You have to build relationships with your peers on the leadership team to help minimize any defensiveness they may feel. And you have to do it outside the regular meetings. You can't leave it to the monthly pressure cooker of the executive leadership team meeting, where there's always going to be some tension.

Another common theme is the challenge of managing long lists of priorities. One of my favorite mantras is that if you have more than three priorities, you have no priorities. Enterprise leaders need to come to terms with the fact that their performance is going to be judged on just a few critical deci-

sions. That requires them to develop the three mission-critical priorities to focus on every day. I always tell my clients that at the end of each day, they should ask themselves, what did I do today to move the needle on those three or four critical items? If you can't answer that question, then you're off track.