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Clark Pettit 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 Clark Pettit, former President & CEO of the Association of Business Information and Media Companies (ABM), shares his lessons, including the importance of a compelling “why,” fostering a sense of co-creation, and how he stepped into leadership as an introvert.

KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

The first lesson is that leadership isn't about the projection of leadership. It's about a creation of followership and a sense of co-ownership. By that, I mean that the leader needs to be clear on where we're going and provide a compelling why—a deeply meaningful sense of why the work matters to draw people in. Then, the leader needs to push decision-making down to people in the organization because they have the information to make the next decisions to refine and execute the strategy continually.

I learned that in a number of ways. The first was realizing that I didn't know how to scale—everything that brought me to where I was at that point in my career didn't work for how I needed to evolve as a leader because I was suddenly working on a much bigger scale. I also knew that people spend so

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much of their conscious energy at work looking for something meaningful to wrap their hearts and minds around. And if you can do that, you can create momentum and agility. It's the only way you can scale as a leader, and it's an absolute, compelling necessity to create something meaningful that people can help co-create with you.

When you create that vision, you must be careful not to complexify the strategy, a common problem I see. It should be pretty simple. What are the problems in the marketplace that you can solve? How are you solving them in a way that no one else can or that is at least a competitive differentiation? How are you articulating that and creating an advantage over others trying to enter your space? If you can figure out the problem and how you solve it, then the only question is, do people value that solution?

Another key lesson starts with the fact that I'm a deep introvert. Although I love interacting with people, it takes energy. And if I'm by myself, I build energy. Realizing how many great leaders turn out to be introverts surprised me. Most introverts think they are the only ones, and leaders are, by definition, extroverts. That's not true.

Yes, there's a natural draw for extroverts to become leaders. They want to be on stage in front of people. However, many introverts end up in leadership roles because they see a problem that needs to be solved, and they step into that role, not consciously wanting to be a leader. That's what happened to me. I wanted to drive the strategy and have an impact, but not all the pieces were moving. I needed to pull them together, and you can't do that at scale without leading, despite your strong preference to be alone.

That creates an interesting challenge to untangle. The first is accepting that it's perfectly okay to be an introvert and then finding ways to leverage that authentic introvert. There are those moments when you must force yourself to step out onto that leadership stage when required. It's surprising how quickly you realize that it isn't that bad. It may drain your energy, but you're connecting with people on a larger scale.

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

A big theme is clarifying a leader's enterprise role versus the role in their job description. After all, job descriptions almost never capture your complete role. They represent a small portion of your role because we structure organizations around market segments, products, functional efficiency, or geographies.

But you can't design an org structure for all of them. So, every org structure is optimized for some things and sub-optimized for others. And therefore a large percentage of what happens in companies happens in the white space between the organizational boxes on the page. Yet the job description is always written inside each box.

So, becoming proficient outside of your box is absolutely critical. When you start your career, you're measured on what you will do inside your box. As you move up, you are more responsible for that white space. So you have to put effort into understanding and leaning into that enterprise responsibility. You have to see the whole chessboard. So, go out in that white space and get the context and

pattern recognition. That's how pieces start to fit together so that you understand how you can have the greatest impact.

Another theme that comes up often is what it means, and does not mean, to be an authentic leader. It's not an excuse for indulging all your poor behaviors. Authenticity means how you are decoded and seen by others aligns with your intention. It's not being authentic to yourself in your own head.

I'll give you a personal example. Somebody once told me that I was unbelievably intimidating and that I sucked all the oxygen out of the room. They told me, in so many words, "When you walk in the room, everything stops. You answer all the questions, move your hands quickly, talk really fast, and answer all the questions. You walk out, and everyone says, what do we do now? What would Clark do if he was still here?"

My immediate reaction was, no, I don't. I thought people were misreading me and that it was their problem. I quickly realized that I was being inauthentic because the way they were decoding me was not the person I wanted to be. And it's not just one person's perception. It's the perception of many, so you have to ramp up that empathy and be enough of a chameleon that your true authentic intention comes across and connects through each person's eyes. That is a delicate balance that leaders need to get right.

The second thing that goes with being authentic is being honest with yourself about what you love and don't love, what you're great at, and what you're never going to be great at. Then you are either going to force yourself to do the stuff you really don't want to, or you are going to empower, enable, support, and celebrate the people who do it.