



Coretha Rushing

Former Chief People Officer of Equifax, Inc.; The Coca-Cola Company

Coretha Rushing 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 Coretha Rushing, former Chief People Officer of Equifax, Inc. and The Coca-Cola Company, shares her lessons, including the impact of positional power, the significance of redo's, and the importance of deciding to build followership through communication.

KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

An important lesson I learned early in my career is understanding the impact of positional power. I saw it first-hand on my first day at the Coca-Cola Company. I remember walking into the building, and the CEO at the time, Roberto Goizueta, was passing by. He said to me, "Good morning, young lady. How are you?" I said, "I'm good!" And he said, "Well, where are you off to?" After I told him about the meeting I was heading to, he said, "I'm going that way. Come with me."

We got in the elevator, and he asked me about myself. I was struck by the fact that this CEO, who clearly was really busy, took the time to talk with me. It's a reminder that as people progress in their careers, they have more positional power, and it's important for them to extend themselves, even in small ways, to send the message that everyone is the same and we're all on the same team.

I put this lesson into practice much later when I was head of HR at Equifax, and we had a data breach. We were on the executive floor day after day, week after week, month after month. Lunches were ordered, and most people would grab something and return to their desks or the next meeting. But I made it a point every day to go to the company cafeteria and sit with people I didn't know and ask them how they were doing. As leaders, you have to build followership, and we often think about communication in terms of a big town hall meeting. But it happens every day, one person at a time.

Another key lesson for me is that everybody gets a redo. I've often been asked to take on teams or manage situations that were in rough shape. My rule was that for the first six weeks, I was not going to look at anyone's personnel file because it's possible that somebody might not have had a good relationship with the outgoing manager because of a style difference.

I've worked with people who didn't have a great reputation, but I gave them a shot on a project, and they delivered. With one employee, after giving him a shout-out in a meeting, he said to the group, "I've never gotten a chance to show what I could do, and I really want to thank you for giving me the opportunity." So everybody gets a reset, and my rule is that people are not their worst moment. We need to give people the opportunity to show what they can do.

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

A common theme is their inability to take action with talent that needs to be exited. Somebody on your team may be a rock-steady employee, but if they just can't make that next step up, they will hold you back from scaling your organization. I always say to people that it can be incredibly disrespectful not to be honest with a person, especially when everyone else on the team knows that they are not pulling their weight. You're doing them a horrible disservice because you're minimizing the possibility that

they could go somewhere else inside or outside the organization and make a contribution. But more importantly, you're not treating an adult like an adult.

I've been surprised how many very senior executives are reluctant to have those conversations, because they haven't built that muscle. My theory is that if you weren't a senior executive before 2008, when so many had to deal with layoffs and restructurings because of the financial crisis, then you've lived in an environment of steady growth for most of your career until the pandemic. That means you've never had to have many of these difficult conversations.

Another key point is that if you have to lay off a number of people, you have to be clear and consistent in making decisions. Otherwise, the credibility of the whole process falls apart if people think it's just a bunch of random decisions. They need to understand that there's a process, and you can't do anything that might make that process look suspect.

Another big theme that comes up with my clients is a lack of understanding that strategy should drive the structure of a company. Because of all the reorganizations occurring, there is a need to look at the ideal structure to help drive toward that future state embedded in your strategy.

I tell people to imagine that their company is a new company, then put everyone who works there in a metaphorical parking lot before they start drawing boxes to structure the company to deliver on

the new strategy. Draw those boxes first, and there should be as few of them as possible to keep the structure simple, and then worry about your people.

In doing that exercise, they often realize that there is no role for certain people, including someone who might be a top performer. A lot of executives struggle with that, and they start creating structures to shoehorn people into roles to preserve something of the old structure.

And even if you don't take any action, that is a decision itself, and it will come back to bite you, particularly as it relates to people decisions. You have to ensure the audio and video are in sync and that there is no gap between what you say is important as a leader and what you do. If there is a gap, it will really minimize the impact of every message about the culture you're trying to create.