

LEADING THROUGH DISRUPTION



What Got You Here, Won't Get You There | Navid Nazemian, Author of “Mastering Executive Transitions”

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Navid Nazemian, PCC, bestselling author of “Mastering Executive Transitions” and former Global Head of HR at Vodafone, shares his key leadership lessons in this Leading Through Disruption interview with The ExCo Group EMEA Managing Director, Dr. Anastassia Lauterbach.

Lauterbach: Could you please walk us through your journey and share two to three moments that brought you to where you are today?

Nazemian: I started my professional career in sales and loved the job. Sales allow you to see, very quickly, how good you are. However, I developed a profound desire to work in the HR function and needed someone who would have offered me an opportunity to prove myself. I still remember the name of the Head of HR at Adidas – Danja Frech. She hired me into the most junior HR role, but she liked having someone on her team who had previously sold Adidas products. She proved right. There are so many things that business professionals can cross-fertilize into HR functions. Over the years, I have resonated highly with commercial leaders as I had been in their shoes previously. In HR, I could have an impact at the systemic level.

Twenty years later, I still love Human Resources. I have worked and lived in five countries. I stepped

down from my Senior HR Position at Vodafone in August 2022, the day HR Magazine nominated me as its Most Influential Practitioner.

Lauterbach: What changed in HR from where you started to what you observe today?

Nazemian: HR is one of those functions where everything underwent a profound change. Talent management, DEI, and sustainability topics evolved. In my early years, hiring was an employer-sided conversation. 'What do you bring to the table? What differentiates you from all the other candidates?' An applicant had to be a good marketeer.

However, in my last year at Vodafone, we hired ca. 800 management trainees yearly. Great graduates had diverse job opportunities and expected many things from their future employers. 'What value would I derive from working here besides my package?' 'What are education options?' 'How do you develop your people?' 'What's your flexible working policy?' Suddenly, HR professionals must learn how to pitch the company they represent so the table has clearly turned.

Lauterbach: What factors besides education shape young people's choice of a prospective employer?

Nazemian: Gone are the days when someone started with one company and stayed there lifelong. From today's perspective, any organization can call themselves lucky if a member of the younger generation spends four years with them. Corporate mission and vision are essential, as they pay into the brand's credibility. And ESG aspects are paramount for landing on a list of desirable employers. Gone are the days when 'no news was good news.' Younger generations want feedback; the other generations must learn to embrace it. I considered myself lucky to have a coach or a mentor when I was young. Today, young people might have multiple mentors as they use various perspectives and career advice.

Lauterbach: How can you ensure, from the HR perspective, that leaders establish effective mentoring relationships with employees?

Nazemian: You start by setting expectations for the leader and the employee. I like an approach I call 'awareness sessions,' when the attendees can discuss what's expected from a good leader and a great employee.

And I have been privileged to work for multinational companies where it was apparent what outstanding leadership looked like. It did not mean copying someone else but following a few guiding principles centered around core values. Being transparent and outspoken about great leadership was a healthy starting point. From there, employee surveys and data-driven approaches helped enormously to refine, improve, and sustain the results.

Some companies run annual, bi-annual, quarterly, or monthly surveys to assess employee engagement. Senior leadership must know whether there are systemic topics to address rather than chasing low-hanging fruit. Engagement surveys are also great for preparing calibration sessions and succession planning meetings.

Whenever these succession planning meetings/talent reviews occurred, I observed what language senior leaders used to describe their people, as their use of language provided a subtle way to gather further insights about their own leadership. Finally, we educated line managers on how to

lead more coach-like, sending them to two training days with some follow-up sessions. There are powerful programs, e.g., from the International Coaching Federation, teaching the basics of leading more like a coach. Whenever the mentoring or coaching topic gets on your agenda, there is one thing to remember. As a direct manager, you always have institutional power. You determine your direct reports' salary increase, bonus payout, and performance rating. And each time a line manager improves their listening skills and learns how to respond with an encouraging question rather than direct advice, they facilitate the growth of their people.

Lauterbach: Companies today are coping with a broad palette of issues, from geopolitical conflicts to technology disruption, from optimizing organizational resilience to implementing ESG and exciting the next generation of hires. How do the breadth and depth of the challenges impact leadership carriers?

Nazemian: In my book, I speak about exponentially challenged leaders in a poly-crisis. Some issues are external, so a leader doesn't have any influence over them. Geopolitics might be one of those. Other wounds are self-inflicted. Polycrisis puts a lot of demand on C-level executives, reflected in average tenure figures. The S&P 500 average CEO tenure is down to 5.9 years, with 30% of CEOs with a tenure below three years. With such performance pressure in the back of your mind, what is the likelihood that you will tackle issues that will manifest ten years later? Everything gets geared towards the next quarterly results, and so on.

In 1995, CEOs were typically measured against four to seven main KPIs. In 2013, there were already twenty-five to forty. According to French Professor Morieux, the level of organizational complexity has increased by a factor of thirty-five! How many KPIs is the CEO of an S&P 500 measured against in 2024? Do these KPIs mean the CEOs get dragged into too many operational issues? What about the span of control if you have 12 or 15 C-Level executives reporting to you? How do you optimize with a better organizational design to be effective and efficient? Can a COO position help you find the best way to manage as a span-breaker?

CEOs and top executives must work with an executive coach or mentor specializing in their most acute challenges. I see how coaches get domain knowledge. For my part, I focus on executive transitions, e.g., from CFO to a CEO role or from HR Director to CHRO, but there are other fields to deep dive into, and other professionals excelling in crisis management, turn-around, or M&As.

Lauterbach: When I work with leaders, I regularly review how they spend their time. Do they actually do what they were hired to do, or do they interim for someone who does not perform? Do they manage themselves as a valuable resource? How much time do they spend on talent management? How do you review time-spending patterns when you mentor?

Nazemian: Looking into time patterns is immensely valuable. Imagine an HR leader who has just been appointed Group CHRO. They will likely need to spend two-thirds of their time on three key activities. The first one is managing high-risk decisions. It might be a complicated ERP upgrade or a Post-Merger Integration. The second is navigating organizational politics. This topic is primarily disliked, but it is the elephant that might trample over everything you intended, leaving your team and yourself with bruises. The third activity is representing the corporate line and inspiring the organization and people outside the business. You can't rely on things you did well before, and you might find a personal inclination in one or two of the top three areas I've just talked about. You could get a coach to support you in areas where you are less productive or skilled.

Lauterbach: Why do so many transitions fail in the first 18 months?

Nazenian: 40% of all transitions fail, according to a study by Heidrick & Struggles conducted over 10 years with 20,000 executive leaders placed. There are three primary reasons for this shocking failure rate: people, politics, and culture.

I want to share a story I think a lot about when approaching executive transitions. I signed up for the Adidas running club when I joined the company. They gave me a running coach and established my competency level, as there were 14 levels in the company, from lazy joggers to seasoned marathon runners. The coach asked me what level I wanted to achieve and if I wanted to run a marathon, he told me I would be supported over the course of the next 12 months to equip me from the nutritional, mental, and physical perseverance perspective. This is what I call professional and qualified support.

Most executives don't seek professional and qualified support when going through transitions. Maybe because they were very successful in the past. However, as Dr. Marshall Goldsmith puts it, What got you here won't get you there. So, no one is protected from failure in the new role if they purely rely on their past performance.

Lauterbach: Is there a correlation between corporate performance and HR having a seat at the top leadership team table?

Nazenian: Having a CHRO role correlates with the company's bottom line, demonstrating the impact of talent management and business performance. A study conducted by SAP SuccessFactors found that companies with CHROs at the C-Suite level are 105% more profitable than those without. Many studies show a correlation between effective people practices and top and bottom-line performance improvements. Interestingly, Prof. Dave Ulrich and Ellie Filler found that today's CHROs resemble CEOs more than other C-suite roles (excluding the COO). This emphasizes how crucial outstanding talent development is for businesses. If companies are worth the talk about the war for talent, they must have a fully committed Chief People Officer.

Lauterbach: According to the Edelman barometer, people lose trust in businesses. How should leaders be mentored to solve the trust crisis?

Nazenian: That's the one-million-dollar question. Ultimately, it is about leadership effectiveness and leader reputation. How can you establish trust within your circle of influence? Can you have a systemic impact and influence another circle of people? Can you scale your influence from ten to thirty and from there to 300 and more? Leaders can develop outstanding reputations, but it is a process that requires deep self-awareness and a scientifically proven and reliable psychometric tool, such as the HOGAN assessment.