



Do You Demonstrate Leadership Even If You Aren't The Leader?

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Trenton Allen, CEO of Sustainable Capital Advisors, reveals key lessons for effective leadership, including the importance of hiring for curiosity and why you should give people the freedom to do their jobs.

This interview with The ExCo Group's Adam Bryant is part of our Art of Leading interview series.

Q. What's your playbook for leadership?

A. We truly operate as a team here, which means being mindful of how we engage with each other on the big and the little things, such as responding promptly to emails and following up with one another.

We also give people the freedom to do their jobs and to use their experience to help address their particular challenges—to be able to get it right, to be able to get it wrong, to learn from it, and to grow from it. We want to give people space because that's where they grow. There is a flip side to that latitude. If someone can't do that, and others must do their job for them, we might need to consider a different role. Everybody needs to be able to carry their own weight.

Q. How do you determine whether somebody is a team player when you are hiring?

A. We evaluate them throughout the process—how timely they respond, how flexible they are, and how engaging they are with the rest of the team. We try to role-model all the little things day-to-day. Are they acting like a member of our team throughout the process?

I'm also looking for a high degree of curiosity. We're in the service business, meaning we usually step into a space where we're trying to digest large amounts of information and help make sense of things. And it's my experience that if people are curious in their personal life, it spills into their professional life. So we're looking for people who are curious about the world because we need to be able to make connections that might not seem so obvious. People who are curious help you think through what-ifs and what could be rather than just seeing the world as it is.

Q. How do you try to understand somebody's curiosity level in an interview?

A. I'll ask people questions about a topic they say they know a lot about, including things outside of work. For example, I'll discuss if someone says they enjoy cooking. What are their favorite dishes? What inspired those dishes? Then, you start to understand how they think and make connections. In one instance, somebody talked about how traveling to a country interested them in that culture's food, and they started reading to learn more about it to understand the world through the eyes of people in that country.

So that conversation is more than about food. There are parallels in the way we work with clients. You have to be able to see the world through their eyes. You must be curious to read their financial reports from the last three years, not just last year's.

Q. What early influences shaped who you are as a leader today?

A. I played many sports early on, including basketball, baseball, and football. When you play team sports, you learn that everyone has a job and that every role is equally important. And when I was in high school, one of the very best leaders of our team was not the star player. He was a small running back who didn't get much game-playing time.

He wasn't loud, and he wasn't abrasive. But when he spoke, all the players and coaches listened. He worked hard every day in every drill and gave everything to the team, even when he didn't play in a game. As I've grown, I've come to really appreciate people who demonstrate leadership, even when they aren't the leader.

Q. What about influences from your parents?

A. They taught me the value of hard work—sometimes doing jobs they loved and sometimes doing jobs they didn't enjoy to ensure we had what we needed as a family. That example of hard work and sacrifice is something I take from them, particularly from my mother.

An important lesson from my father is that there are no limitations on your ability to do something. He had all sorts of hobbies and interests. He taught himself to paint and to play classical guitar. He really delved into photography and cooking.

He was always interested in the next thing, and that approach became part of what I consider my role

here. I'm a professional brainstormer. I let my mind wander and ask, "What if...?" You have to try new things and not be afraid to fail because the only failure is not trying.

Q. What about key lessons from early in your career, when you first started managing people?

A. In my second year out of college, I had a couple of people who didn't technically report to me, but their work had to come through me, and I felt very responsible for every aspect of their work. I became the bottleneck and we were missing deadlines. My boss then explained to me that, at some point, I had to let go.

"Your job is to make sure it's right, but you can't do it yourself because that's not your job," he said. "That's what happens in life. At every step, you're letting go a little bit of doing the day-to-day work, and you have to get comfortable with being a little uncomfortable. That tension is where you need to be."

Q. How would you finish the sentence, "The hardest part of leadership is...?"

A. Being honest with oneself. Being able to assess what you're good at and whether you're on the right track regarding the company's strategy, how you're doing, where you can get better, and how you're evaluated. We do reviews and assessments, but every leader needs people on their team who can be really honest with them and hold up a mirror—an accurate mirror, not just a fun-house mirror.

Q. When you give executives coaching advice, what theme often comes up?

A. I share this advice, particularly with women and minority men and women: No one can advocate for you like yourself, so don't be afraid to speak up and ensure that you are seen and that people know your value and contribution.

And do it in a manner that makes you comfortable. If you are whispering, whisper as loud as you can. If you're boisterous, be boisterous. Be true to who you are, but you have to advocate for your next role, how you move forward, and how you navigate your career. You must ensure you're growing but cannot delegate that ability or authority to anyone else.