



# Bob Brennan'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. Bob Brennan, an executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group and former Chairman/CEO of Veracode, imparts his lesson on how to lead effectively. He emphasizes the notion that one may not be as capable as one thinks, underscores the significance of generating greater value within organizations, and stresses the importance of clarity in communication.

## KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

The first lesson is that you're not as capable as you think you are. If you're a leader, you obviously have to think of yourself as capable; otherwise, you couldn't lead very effectively. The problem starts when you begin thinking that, for example, you can take somebody who is indecisive and make them decisive, or you can buy a company and turn it into a different kind of company.

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I once destroyed a bunch of value at a company by promoting somebody to a global position who I knew struggled with making decisions. He didn't change, and my decision to put him in that role

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probably cost us 18 months of progress and led to hundreds of millions in lost revenue. It wasn't his fault. It was my fault. And I've made similar mistakes, like trying vainly to shift the focus of a company I invested in.

I have an active imagination, and I am always thinking about how to create more value in organizations. But I've learned to spend more time on “premortems” to check my thinking. For example, I'll ask, has anyone ever done something like this before? The lesson is that when you are lying to yourself about your capabilities, you can get in a lot of trouble.

A second lesson is that you're not as clear as you think you are. Over the years, I've heard many executives say something like, “They just don't get it,” and the “they” may refer to employees, customers, investors, or other stakeholders. But if somebody doesn't get what you are saying, it's not their problem—it's your problem, and you need to agonize over how to make yourself clear.

That point was driven home to me early in my career. I was in my early thirties and had this huge P&L in a distribution business with about 1,200 employees. The company did a 360 on me—the first time I had been through that process—and it said that I was really great at holding people accountable but that I was really bad at setting expectations. If you're looking at that feedback in any kind of an objective way, well, that sounds like a jerk. I realized that people must have been scared of me, and I hated that. I've never believed that people do anything better when they are scared. From that moment on, I've always asked people what I can do to be more effective. If you ask often enough, they'll give you constructive feedback; if you act on it, you will be more effective. Simple, but it works.

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

The first bit of advice is one that I often share with people who are in the C-suite. They might be an EVP in charge of sales at one of the biggest companies in the world, but the message is the same, regardless of your title—the C-suite team you're on is more important than the team you lead. Without that mentality, people spend a lot of time and energy defending their turf and treating their own team as more important than the leadership team, which means the enterprise will not be as effective as it could be.

The way you get defensiveness out of an environment is to ask questions—including, “How can I help you?”—rather than making statements. If you approach people with that humility, they are less inclined to fight you on issues. It's a reminder that the best questions in business have nothing to do with business. It's not just offering to help. Just about every time you ask someone for help, they will likely help you.

I worry, especially post-pandemic, when so much work is being done remotely that schedules are becoming very compressed, leaving very little time to think and really connect with people. So, you need to build non-business questions into your business meetings because, ultimately, they will help your business. How are you, really? Is there something I can help you with? Can you help me with this issue? If you have those human conversations, you are more likely to solve the business questions faster.