



# Tom Kilroy'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. Tom Kilroy, an executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group and former EVP of Intel, imparts his leadership insights including, being willing to make the tough calls, acknowledging those behind the team's success, and the importance of reaching out to others to see how you can help.

### KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

One is about being willing to make the tough call. Leaders often think about that phrase in terms of making tough calls about the business. But what I found is that a lot of leaders had trouble making tough calls about people. They would let people stay on even though it was clear to me and others that they weren't performing. And that compromised their credibility.

And so as I advanced to senior leadership roles, I decided that regardless of somebody's seniority or past accomplishments, I would hold them to the same standard as everyone else. Of course, if you see performance waning, you first have a conversation to say, "Here's what I'm seeing, and there needs to be some correction." You want to try to help them get back on track. But inaction in those circumstances is unacceptable. When people around you see that somebody on your team is not performing, it compromises your credibility as a leader if you don't act, especially if you tell others they



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should be making tough calls. When interviewing for leadership positions, try asking questions about experiences with tough terminations. It's quite informative.

Another key lesson comes from when I was a kid—the values instilled in me around treating people how you'd wish to be treated. That was how I grew up, and I thank my parents for that. That became more real in the business environment during my first ten years of working at Intel. It had a very intense culture; one behavioral value was constructive confrontation. That was a defining value and, when followed appropriately, very effective. But the day-to-day grind could wear people down. I watched some leaders appropriately drive the business hard but with complete disregard for how they were treating their people. For them, it simply meant being tough and direct, but they were missing out on the human element.

Although I fully embraced the corporate culture, I adapted my approach to ensure I was treating individuals how I would wish to be treated. I ran a large global sales and marketing group, so inspiring thousands from a distance was a challenge. So, one example of how I could connect with individuals on a human

level was to understand who the leaders and individual contributors were behind our success. When I visited these countries, I would ask the leaders in those regions to share names and stories of individuals who stood out because of their accomplishments. That way, I could mention them by name during an open forum and connect with them in person. It sounds basic, but it's about showing genuine interest in people and caring. It's just treating people how you wish to be treated and making that human connection.

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

Because I generally work with clients who are leaders at larger companies, we often discuss the challenge of navigating the enterprise and thinking outside your own organization. These executives often have such intense day jobs that they focus almost entirely on their own deliverables. So, we talk about the importance of broadening your network of influence to enhance your ability to get things done in your organization and perhaps contribute to the cause of the larger enterprise.

As part of that conversation, I will ask them how they would rate the strength of their relationship with their peers who run other parts of the organization on a scale of one to ten. Often, they will score them very low and offer an explanation that it's because they are busy and don't have the time to invest in building that relationship. So, I will encourage them to work on strengthening those relationships, starting with just one or two key leaders. When they do that, most of them come back to tell me later about how that investment of time and energy was a game changer for them.

Part of that outreach includes asking your boss how you can help them. Again, people can get overly focused on delivering their day-to-day responsibilities. I was advised early in my career to ask my boss, "How can I help you?" They may just thank you for the offer and say they don't need you to do anything for them. But they might very well be grateful that you asked because it truly is lonely at the top.

Another piece of advice I share is an expression that an early manager would repeat often. He would say, "Don't trade a career for a moment." As the years went by, I didn't think about it much. But as my responsibilities grew, and I was in organizations with intense cultures, there were some challenging moments when things got personal and sensitive. You should address those moments thoughtfully and embrace courage when you need to take a stand. But you can't let those moments be driven by emotion, which might lead you to do or say things that you will regret later and might cost you in terms of career advancement or damaging an important relationship. You need to take a deep breath because time can be your friend.