



Andrew House'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. Andrew House, executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group, Board Director at Nissan Motor Corp., Dentsu Group Inc., and the Former CEO of Sony Interactive Entertainment, shares his invaluable leadership lessons. These include the benefits of taking responsibility when building a culture, the understanding that nothing is immutable, and the importance of promoting people based on their potential rather than perceived skill.

KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

An early and powerful lesson for me was about the importance of taking responsibility for your team's mistakes and giving the team all the credit for their achievements. I learned that through a negative experience because I had a very early boss who, unfortunately, would sell me out even though you were carrying out his specific instructions. I remember being dumbfounded by his behavior and then

vowing that I would never be that kind of manager.

I will always take responsibility. And when you do that, there's an ancillary benefit in that you build a culture where people on the team know that it's okay to take risks because they have someone who will take that accountability and then guide them to avoid a similar mistake in the future.

A second lesson I learned from a mentor who told me, "Nothing is immutable. None of your decisions, however big they seem at the time, have to be set in stone forever." Understanding that releases you from the paralysis of thinking that you always have to make the absolute 100 percent right decision. It also helps build that muscle of being able to make decisions based on imperfect information, which is now the case more often, given the world in which we operate and the speed of decision-making that's required.

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I learned that lesson when I was in an early management role, and I was torn over a hiring decision. The person had the skills we needed at a critical time, but some of their behaviors gave me the sense that hiring them would be a risk to the culture. I literally lost sleep over this. I discussed it with my boss, who was my mentor at the time, and he said the most freeing words, "Whichever way you go, you can always change it." It was so simple, and yet the weight came off my shoulders and it informed my approach to decision-making all the way through my career.

Another lesson was about the importance of promoting people based on their potential and the future needs of the organization, rather than on someone's accumulated experience or perceived

mastery of skills. I watched that same mentor who taught me about decision-making also make very interesting hiring and organizational changes based on a smart idea of what the future state of the organization was going to be. I asked him about it, and he said he learned to do that because he spent his career as a music entertainment executive. So his whole business had been identifying and nurturing talent.

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

One common theme is about how people scale themselves as leaders when they take on new responsibilities. I've found that even very talented executives can struggle with this issue, usually caused by some interlocking challenges. One is that they don't really know or trust their team. Another is that if they are not comfortable jumping into the new responsibilities of the role, then they will revert back to doing the day-to-day work that they should be delegating to others. Another behavioral challenge can be what I call the "I alone can fix this" syndrome, which is just an overestimation of one's own talents versus those of other people.

To help these executives, I will have them unpack their core new responsibilities and then ask them, based on their talent and real interest and capability, which of those, say, six different areas can they individually contribute to best? And they will usually pick two of them, which then leads to the question, what about the other four? Then we will talk about the best possible people on the team to handle them and how they're going to be empowered to do the work.

The second theme that comes up is how to maintain a balance between integrity and effectiveness in

a negative or challenging organizational culture. All organizations are matrixed to some degree, and if the culture is passive-aggressive and people are territorial, how do you navigate that environment without losing your sense of self and becoming part of the problem? How can you be a change agent and model different behavior while still making sure that the system doesn't beat you down?

How you do that is very personal. But when I coach clients about this, I ask them to think about where their moral compass sits, then look at the areas in which they're challenged within the organization and try to find some way of hitting that balance so they can accomplish their goals. It's about the old adage of knowing what you can change, what you can control, and what you can't.