



**Janet Barnard**

Former Chief People Officer of Cox Automotive

# Janet Barnard'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.

Janet Barnard, an executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group and former Chief People Officer of Cox Automotive, imparts her leadership wisdom. She underscores the leader's role in asking great questions, acknowledges that perfection is impossible to achieve, and highlights the value of nurturing relationships with peers.

### KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

One lesson is that leaders do sometimes need to have answers, but more importantly, their role is to ask great questions. I realized that in my first executive-level role when I was promoted from among my peers. About 90 days into the role, I felt like we weren't getting the traction I wanted, and I wasn't feeling a sense of buy-in from my team. I had a coach, and in a meeting with my team that she facilitated, one individual was bold enough to say, "Janet, you don't have to try so hard." It really hit home because he was saying that I was still trying to be the expert. I have a financial background, and so my approach had always been to be right, accurate, and share the facts. But in this leadership role, that was not my job anymore. I had to allow space for them to provide answers and respond to

some great questions that I should have been asking. I wasn't taking advantage of all the knowledge around the table.

From that point on, I also focused on developing the members of my team to be great at asking questions because this skill needed to roll out across the organization. They had to learn and grow from it, just as I did because we were in a very high-growth and fast-paced business at the time. In that environment, the only way to get to the best answer was to bring people together in the room for a good discussion and debate.

Another lesson from early in my career was that, as a leader, you have to become accustomed to feeling overwhelmed. I was working very long hours at the time, and I was in a financial role, leading the planning and budgeting side of the business. One of our HR leaders came to me one day and handed me a newspaper article with the headline, "Are you overly responsible, or are you a workaholic?" I had been raised in an environment where my mother was a perfectionist. Everything we did

had to be done to a T. I was an accountant by degree and by trade at the beginning of my career, and that also reinforced the importance of perfection. But perfection is impossible to achieve, of course, especially in the business world where there is always more work to be done than you can possibly do.

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It was a real eye-opener for me because it was affecting my health at the time, and it was affecting how I was spending time with my kids, my husband, and my friends. So, the colleague who gave me that article probably literally saved my life and my career at that point. She helped me to be more open to rethinking the hours I was putting into the work I was doing. Since then, in many of my roles, I've used the expression, "Hey, it's just used cars," or whatever industry I was in. "Let's just remember that nobody died today because of something we did or didn't do." Even now, I still have to pay attention to that. In today's world, it's even

more critical to manage that feeling of being overwhelmed, because it's impossible to be "done."

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

One common theme is the importance of building relationships because they trump everything. That's a hard lesson to learn. As leaders grow, they naturally want to cater to the team that reports to them and make sure they're taken care of. And they naturally want to cater to their bosses and make sure they're happy. But people often forget about their peers. And yet, as people move into senior roles, those relationships become probably the most important because you don't have control over everything, and you often need to work with your peers to get things done. So I'm a big believer in investing time to build those relationships. Invite your peer out for lunch. Find the things you have in common that are outside of work. That way, you'll have more of a bond instead of a transactional relationship.

A second theme is that it can be hard to remember that who you are is good enough. Senior executives can be a little taken aback by the feedback they get at work, and through the coaching we do. Sometimes they will look at me and say, "You're asking me to be someone that I'm not." Our brains can jump quickly in those situations to think that we have to change who we are, but we obviously can't do that. So I tell them to be confident and happy with who they are and all the great things they bring to the table, but I also remind them that we all have some part of our wiring we have to manage.

Like many people, I've had coaches throughout my career who literally have changed my life because they helped uncover blind spots I had.

For example, I learned early on that I'm a "toe-tapper." I think I set clear expectations, but I tend to set them at a high level, while at the same time having an idea in my mind when they should be done. But I don't always articulate that timeline to the person, and I'll wind up, in effect, at their doorway, tapping my toe to signal my impatience. I didn't realize I was doing it, but once I did, I became much more cognizant of setting clearer expectations. We can't change who we are, but with awareness, we can become better at managing those things that are not necessarily our strengths.