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John Hartman'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.

John Hartman, an executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group, former President of International Equifax, and former EVP and CCO of Acuity Brands, shares his leadership lessons. This includes assuming reasonableness during negotiations, being willing to walk away, and staying true to your style.

KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

One important lesson I've learned over the years is about negotiations and the importance of assuming reasonableness on the other side of the table. I learned this early in my career when I did mergers and acquisitions on Wall Street. I noticed how excited my senior colleagues became when they got the "kill." It was like a chess game for them; sometimes, deals wouldn't happen because people weren't willing to negotiate. They were out for the "win" rather than the proverbial "win-win."

Later in my career, when I was leading corporate development for a major corporation, I took a different approach and started trying to understand what the other side wanted—what they cared about and what was important to them. And it isn't my approach only with deals; anytime somebody is on the other side of the table, I'm always trying to figure out what's important to them. Equally important

is to be clear on what's important to you because often, people give up things that aren't important to the other side. So, I always try to determine what the other side wants in any negotiation or discussion. The more you stay true to that approach, the faster you can get to win-win outcomes.

Granted, sometimes you encounter intransigent individuals who don't approach negotiating, trying to be reasonable. And in those instances, you must stay calm and not raise your voice. You also have to be willing to walk away. I've long said every deal must hit rock bottom before it happens. So, you might have to say, "We seem to be in very different places, and maybe we need to take some time. If we decide to come back together, I'm always here." I've walked away from the table in about 80 percent of the deals I've ultimately done.

A second key lesson is the importance of being true to your style. Many years ago, I read many management books and studied the leaders at the companies where I worked, and sometimes I would

try to adopt their style. Later on, I realized that you are who you are and are valued for who you are, so be careful about adopting somebody else's style. Yes, you can learn things from them, but it should always be to help hone your style, not adopt it.

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This point was really driven home when I joined a new company and met my team. One was a real standout—the kind of person you want on your team. When I met with him, he shared that he was working on his leadership style because he had received a lot of feedback saying that he should show a wider range of emotions at work. In particular, he had been told in his last three reviews that he should “bang the table” more. I said, “Stop right there. I never want to see you bang the table. That's not who you are.”

You are who you are and shouldn't try to impersonate another individual. If you do, it will never be productive because then you can't be natural, and you can't think on your feet anymore. You won't be as effective.

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

One theme that comes up often is the importance of “laddering ideas.” As people move into bigger roles, they often feel they must be the smartest person in the room. And so, when they have to present an idea—to the senior leadership team or the board, for example—they spend weeks or months trying to perfect their pitch. They want to convince everybody in the room that it's a fabulous idea.

But I've never seen an idea that couldn't be made better by the collective thinking of the relevant group. When I talk about laddering ideas, I mean putting your idea on the table and truly listening for feedback. Don't just think about how you can convince them that it's a good idea. Don't be defensive and try to shoot down objections or other approaches. As people share their thoughts, that will “ladder” your idea and take it to higher levels. So, take in the feedback and try to understand the message at the core of what they're saying because that could improve your idea.

Another theme that comes up often is your job description. No matter what we're doing, it's incumbent upon all of us to review or rewrite our job descriptions periodically. That starts with asking yourself: Am I doing what I should be doing? How am I allocating my time? Are there areas where I should be spending more time? What do my team, my boss, my division, and my company need from me in my current role?

It sounds simple, but it's easy to get caught up in the day-to-day work of deadlines, crises, and customer and employee issues. People want to prove to themselves and the people they work with that they are busy. But are you doing the right things? And once you're at the C-suite level, or a layer or two below the C-suite, people are rarely telling you what you have to do. So you have to spend time answering that question for yourself and remember what you're good at and not good at. You're never going to turn your biggest weakness into your biggest strength. How do you structure your time to ensure you do the right things?