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Laura Yecies' 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. Laura Yecies, an executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group, CEO Bone Health Technologies, and former CEO of Neurosync, Catch, and SugarSync, shares her leadership lessons. These include the importance of repetition in communicating strategy, navigating difficult relationships, and understanding people's motivations.

KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

An early lesson I learned is that regardless of how much you think you have communicated, it's not enough by a multiplicative factor. This came up when I worked at Netscape. I was brought in as a director and eventually was promoted to run the browser division, a pretty large team of 235 people, mostly engineers.

During our weekly all-hands meeting, I would talk about the strategy, and I thought that I made clear what our three goals were, including the order and how we were working on them. Then, I would see in my day-to-day interactions with people that they weren't clear about the goals. I didn't understand it at first, but I realized over time that I had to repeat things many more times than I thought. The saying, "Repetition doesn't spoil the prayer," is really true. I had worried that I would be too repetitive but that's not how it was taken by the team.

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It reminded me of when I was growing up and playing violin. My violin teacher would tell me that, during a performance, you must consciously go slower for it to be the right tempo, or else you will find yourself playing the piece too quickly. It's similar to communications—not that you should speak slower, but that you must slow down and repeat things to bring everybody along. The rule I developed was to always communicate three times more than I thought I should and to vary how I get the message across—with different formats and examples—because people take in information differently.

A second key lesson was about the importance of having the right people on your team with the right motivations, ethics, and attitude. Nothing can substitute for that, and the strength of those relationships can take you through the ups and downs of business. I learned this in my first CEO role. That was in 2008 when the world was falling apart financially. We had just furloughed some employees, and I needed to raise money. I also needed to bring in some key talent, and I was able to recruit people who had worked with me before. They were willing to take a chance because we had that level of trust.

Some of that approach comes from my parents, who are doctors. My dad is a family practice doctor, and I talked with him years ago about how much variation I had in my career, working on different products and roles. By contrast, in medicine, you're typically taking care of the same illnesses repeatedly. And he said to me, "You have it completely wrong. It might be the same illnesses over and over, but it's a different person every time." He was right, of course, and I think I'm like my dad in that it is about the people. After all, it is those relationships that transcend the work and really give it meaning.

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

One topic that comes up frequently in my coaching is navigating difficult relationships. Often, there are people you need to work with, and, for whatever reason, the relationship with that person is difficult. Sometimes, there are competing interests. Sometimes, there are just different styles. Sometimes, the other person might have low EQ or be in a difficult personal situation.

So, we will discuss ways to approach those relationships. And the more the person I'm coaching can optimize their ability to listen and understand, the better the chances are that those difficult relationships can be improved. The key is listening for understanding and trying to get below the surface so you can understand the other person's motivations. That can be the unlock. And you have to avoid black-and-white thinking about the other person's motivations.

Another common theme that comes up with clients is about elevating their focus on strategy. As people move up the ladder, they are often promoted because they are very good at their function. When they move into a senior leadership role, staying there and focusing on their core expertise can be very tempting. Because of that, they may not focus on strategy and what the people they are leading really need. So, I will push them to elevate their thinking. What are the key strategic issues they face? Where are they focusing their time? Are they providing the leadership the team needs?