



Paul Block'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. Paul Block, an executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group and former CEO of Revlon International, Proteus Capital, and Operating Partner of Behrman Capital, shares his leadership lessons. These include the importance of “hiring up,” giving strong people room to flourish and grow, and demonstrating resilience in today’s political, technological, and macroeconomic challenges.

KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

One is that you want to “hire up” when you are building your team—that you should always bring in strong people and give them enough sunlight to let them flourish and grow. You should give them positive reinforcement and the credit they deserve for doing their job well. You should always counsel them in private and praise them in public. Encourage them to work together as a team.

There is a specific moment that drove home that lesson for me. When I was chairman and president of Revlon International, we were at a global meeting with all of our regional presidents and country general managers. Our newly hired vice president of marketing was presenting. I realized that this



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executive, a really good guy, was just not the strong and inspirational leader we needed in that role. There were about 150 people in the room. As I looked around, I realized he was not connecting with anybody.

At various points in my career, I saw peers hiring people who were the antithesis of “hiring up.” They were hiring down because they wanted to make sure they continued to look like the most brilliant person in the room. That didn’t bode well for them in the long term, even if it provided them with some job security in the short term.

The second lesson is that politics can be really destructive in a lot of corporate cultures. You shouldn’t get involved. Don’t do anything that will prevent you from being your authentic self. Be clear about your objectives. Make sure that they are clearly communicated in a way that shows what you’re doing is the right thing for the business—not necessarily because it “fits” the culture.

I learned that lesson at Revlon. There was a period in the 1980s when Ronald Perelman gained control of Revlon through an acquisition company he owned called Pantry Pride. The culture at Revlon became incredibly divisive. Some people were running around saying they wouldn’t work for Pantry Pride- they wouldn’t work in the fruit and vegetable section. Others were open to the idea that some good could come from the new ownership. People playing politics suffered in the long term because they were paying more attention to themselves and how they fit in the “old” culture than they were to doing their job well.

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

One of the most important themes I’m dealing with today as a coach is navigating today’s political, technological, and macroeconomic challenges. The answer is that you have to demonstrate resilience. We must recognize that the playbook we had when we started our careers is not necessarily the same one we are working with today. We will have to change course and shift our company’s direction much more rapidly and with much less information, instead relying more on good judgment and the input of good people around you.

I tend to define resilience a bit differently than the way many people define it. It’s not always about staying the course and muscling through adversity. Resilience also means that you cannot necessarily carve your path so deeply that it limits your ability to shift positions. It’s recognizing that different inputs will require different responses, and you have to give yourself the freedom to maneuver and not be locked into one position. Many years ago, I took tai chi lessons, which I thought had important parallels for business leadership. You learn to accept and let ideas flow through you rather than being rigid and blocking them. That mentality has tremendous applicability in business.

Another common theme that comes up is the importance of listening. So many clients of ours have moved into senior leadership roles after many years of being very successful operators. They are being challenged to become inspirational, strategic leaders. There’s a big difference, of course. When they were operators, they made the decisions. They were the boss, and they controlled the outcome.

When you're an operator, you're often forgiven for walking into a conference room and taking up all the oxygen. Being a leader requires listening. You must focus much more on what other people say to you. You have to let them speak and listen to what they say.

I once hired a very smart and experienced woman to be our vice president of public relations. She was very good at her job. After about three months of working for me, she was in my office, and I disagreed with a proposal that she had presented. I told her, "Let me tell you how to do your job." It was the most disgraceful, antagonistic, insulting thing I could have said because she knew infinitely more about her job than I did. But I had the mistaken point of view that my authority extended to telling her how to do her job. That was precisely the opposite of what I now coach people to do, which is to listen more.