



# Randy Walker's Leadership Lessons

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In this series, we explore some of the most important lessons and insights from our executive coaches and mentors.

Randy Walker, an executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group and former Chairman & CEO of IBM Asia Pacific, shares his leadership lessons. He emphasizes the importance of taking ownership, avoiding the desire to be Superman by trusting those around you, and learning how to scale yourself effectively.

### KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

When I ran Asia for IBM, it was a very big role, with 100,000 people across many geographies. I said to my leadership team early on, "I can't scale without you taking ownership." I looked for leaders who were smart, could operate in a remote environment, and could take the initiative to get things done.

But that was a big change from how I led earlier in my career. When I was a consultant, I was very hands-on. I would be the one who wanted to do the big deals. When I moved into the Asia role, I was responsible for all the different parts of the business, including areas that were way outside my

comfort zone. I still tried to, in effect, remain hands on by traveling constantly around the world. The business grew and was exhilarating, but I couldn't keep it up long-term. The travel was mentally and physically exhausting, and it wasn't sustainable. Even when I was with my family, I wasn't present. I realized that if I was going to scale, I had to change my approach, stop trying to be Superman and trust the people who worked for me to do their job. It was a game changer for me, professionally and personally.

I learned another important lesson from that period when I had to scale myself. Because of my background as a consultant, I learned to always put myself in the customer's shoes to get a sense of what they need before I try to sell to them. Listening for understanding is a core skill that helped me a lot. I then used that same approach moving into leadership roles—to listen to my teams so that I understood what they needed and what they needed me to know.

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I thought that my superpower was listening, but after I moved into that Asia role, my team gave me feedback that I wasn't really listening anymore—that I was too busy and only giving answers. So, there was a big gap between what I thought I was good at and how my team saw me. So, I refocused my schedule to make sure I had time to really listen to people and not just make snap decisions. That made me a much better leader.

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

We spend a lot of time on stakeholder management. Many of the people I've mentored are moving into bigger new roles, and I find they have not spent much time thinking through who should be part of their extended stakeholder network. Once they do that, they need to treat them like customers. What are

they interested in? What do they need? What is the quality of your relationship with them? What do they want to get out of the relationship?

You also need to be able to interact differently with the various stakeholders. If you're dealing with a board member, it will be a much more formal discussion than dealing with a colleague. Those discussions with my clients all lead to creating a plan about the approach and frequency for meeting with each stakeholder.

Another big theme is self-awareness. I've always been a huge believer in 360-degree feedback. That's how I learned, as I mentioned earlier, that people didn't see me as a great listener, even though I thought it was my superpower. It's important to know whether there is a gap between how you think people see you and how they actually see you and then figure out how to close that gap.

If the gap is small, it's easier to help someone refine their style. If there is a big gap, we spend time trying to understand why people see them differently from how they see themselves and making sure they own and accept that. Once we have clarity about what needs to be done, we can set a plan for working on their areas of strength and weakness. You really have to build a solid base of self-awareness to be an effective leader.