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Beth Krasna's Leadership Lessons

| ExCo Insights

October 28, 2024

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

Beth Krasna, executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group and president of the board of directors at Ethos Services SA and Geneva Graduate Institute, shares her leadership lessons. She emphasizes that it's perfectly fine to refrain from immediate action and discusses her experience developing soft power and mastering the art of framing questions for better communication.

KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

As a CEO, one lesson I learned was that it's okay to decide not to act immediately in certain situations. But it has to be deliberate, and you have to communicate what you are thinking. Otherwise, there will be a perception that you're dithering or weak.

This can come up with a toxic manager who is a very good performer. Those people are particularly difficult, mainly because their values don't match the company's. I faced this situation when I was working on a turnaround. Money was tight at the company, and I didn't want to lose this particular employee's expertise and performance. I knew that replacing him would take quite a while. Everybody is watching you to see what you are going to do. I couldn't replace him right away, but I gave him clear

feedback on how he needed to improve. I communicated with his team about what was happening and gave them an outlet to talk to me if they were mistreated.

Another key lesson for me was developing my soft power and being more efficient at influencing others. I had many experiences where I had trouble swaying my fellow board members or the company's management team to think about an issue differently. But over time, I learned how to speak up in board meetings, especially around hard subjects. Where most people would just let it go, I would say, "I'd like to challenge this. Can we talk about it?" In the beginning, I was worried that I would be seen as raining on their parade if the management came with a proposal, and I was pointing out that there was an angle they were missing.

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Part of the art of constructively challenging people is in how you frame your questions. Instead of saying, for example, "I don't believe that you've taken into account the integration time of that plan," I will instead say, "Have you thought about the potential sliding of the integration period? Have you run any simulations?"

I learned this lesson a dozen years ago when I was president of a foundation that organizes an international ballet competition in Lausanne every year. I watched how the professional ballerinas coached and gave feedback to the kids. Instead of saying, "That's the wrong way to do it," they said, "Why don't you try it this way?" And then they praised them when it worked out. From then on, I worked to change how I framed my questions in terms of something to think about rather than direct criticism.

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

All my clients invariably want to talk about their people. It's lonely being the boss, and having a coach provides a safe space to discuss a problem they are having with their boss or a subordinate. Much of the advice I give them goes back to my earlier point about communication. For example, I had one client who wanted his deputy to take on additional responsibilities. That person flatly refused, and my client was shocked. He said he would impose the decision, partly because he had already told his boss it would happen. I explained to my client that ordering his deputy to do something would not help with his motivation and that he needed to explain why he was making this change. And in fact, he was trying to groom his deputy as his potential successor, but he hadn't told him that.

The second common theme is stakeholder management. Different people in your stakeholder network have different expectations, and it's essential to work through the exercise of what you expect from your stakeholders, what they expect from you, and what you can do to move their expectations. That's always a very useful discussion because often, people are frustrated with a situation that they feel they can't change. It's often surprising to me how many senior executives don't think in terms of the stakeholder matrix. They don't put themselves in other people's shoes to better understand how to influence people to help them realize their goals.