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# Importance of Developing Talent | Patrick Gournay'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.

Patrick Gournay, an executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group and former CEO of The Body Shop International and Dannon USA, shares his leadership lessons. He emphasizes the importance of developing talent, guarding against complacency, and creating alignment.

## KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

One lesson is that you have to guard against complacency when things are going well. You work hard to achieve a sense of alignment on strategy, and ideally, the results follow from that. When that happens, it can feel like you are floating along. Nothing bad is happening. Things are fluid and easy.

But you have to recognize that those periods usually don't last very long. You need to be very careful about not becoming blind to what's happening and changing around you. Your competitors will launch a new effort to gain market share, and you will find yourself playing defense. I learned that the hard way. We became a bit too complacent in one of my companies. We were doing so well, and we thought nothing bad could happen to the business. But things always happen. To guard against that,

you have to create a culture where people are comfortable exchanging ideas and challenging each other in a respectful way.

The second lesson was about the importance of developing talent to help them get to the next level. I remember when I was a vice president of sales at one company, and over a period of about five years, I was able to promote eight people on my team to general manager roles. I don't remember our market share at the time. I don't remember our revenue or profit figures, but I do remember those eight people.

I learned the importance of developing talent from the guy who was head of sales before me at Dannon. He built a reputation for his team as a place where people could be trained and developed for future leadership roles. This created such a positive, dynamic environment. People were eager to join our team so that they could grow, and they knew that a system was in place that would allow them to do that.

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

One topic that comes up often is the importance of creating alignment in an organization. It's not just a matter of agreeing on a strategy and the values of the organization. That's important, but it's not enough. Consider the example of how a company leverages artificial intelligence. Just because there's a shared belief in its importance doesn't make it happen. You have to make sure that three components are working together. The first is that the AI agenda has to be grounded in the needs of the business. The second is that the technology team in the company has to execute that plan. The third element is that everyone in the company has to be capable and willing to use and implement the technology.

This is where the CEO comes in. Their position is like an orchestra conductor—they need to find the balance between those components to benefit the enterprise. In other words, the CEO's role is not only to articulate the company strategy but also to engineer it.

Those three parts have to be in balance. It won't work if the CEO delegates the AI strategy to the technology team because then the plan may not be rooted in the needs of the business. What is going to produce results? What's going to create a competitive advantage? On the other hand, you can't only rely on non-technology executives to drive that work because they may not be aware of what technology can do for the business. They may not know all the possibilities. You need to engineer the system in a way that takes into account all three elements to make a new initiative like that successful.

Another big theme comes up when people are considering their next big job, including the CEO role in some cases. There can be an assumption that everybody wants those roles. Maybe, maybe not. Those moments can raise a lot of questions, both personal and professional.

If a client of mine wants to become a CEO, I will test their interest by asking them some questions. Can they present a concise vision of what they want to do? What would they do differently and better than the current CEO? And are they ready for all the pressures and stress that come with more responsibilities?

The most important question is, how do you define success? Generally speaking, people are more aware of work-life balance today than they were before. It's not that they don't want to work hard. It's more about the introspection. What do they want to achieve? Why is it important to them? People are looking at their lives in a more comprehensive way today, and professional promotions are not the only yardstick of success.