



Leaders Have to Be Able to Tell a Growth Story That Captures the Imagination of Employees

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Herrish Patel, President of Unilever USA and CEO, Personal Care North America, shares his leadership lessons, including the importance of “wasting time together,” balancing time horizons, and hiring leaders who can tell a growth story.

This interview is part of our Art of Leading interview series with The ExCo Group’s Adam Bryant.

Q. What is your leadership playbook when you move into a new role?

A. I think there’s a real 50-50 split between “hardware” and “software” when you approach strategic leadership, executional leadership, and people leadership. Let me start on the hardware side. I’m a big fan of spending your first 90 days listening, building, and validating a hypothesis and then launching a strategic vision that resonates with the organization. They have to feel it, and it has to move them to want to do something different.

The second piece under hardware is operations. I take a three-year strategic plan, then break it down into OKRs—objectives and key results—so it’s digestible, and then I socialize that across the organization.

Then, I focus on the software. I believe fundamentally that structure follows strategy. If you look at someone’s organizational setup, you should be able to work out what are the big strategic bets and

how they think they're going to win in the future. Then, I source the best talent to execute the strategy.

The last thing I'll say is that I'm a big fan of wasting time together. The corporate world has become obsessed with objectives and outcomes. The best way to gel as a team is to waste time together. When you start to understand people beyond a work dimension, including what's important to their lives, that's when the team hums.

Q. Say more about the importance of wasting time together.

A. When I moved to the US three years ago, my leadership team spent a few days together early on during a retreat in a log house, sharing our stories. What shaped who you are today? What's important in your life? What's important about this role? What's the impact you want?

There's something powerful when you sit in a circle, with no phones, you're out in nature, and you ask each other simple questions. How can the team be in service to your needs? And what is it that the team needs from you to be successful? Once you get to that level of vulnerability and trust, then you become unbreakable as a team. I'm also a big fan of every-other-month team dinners, and it's not about work. What's going on in your life?

Q. Is there a story from earlier in your life when you learned the importance of wasting time together?

A. It's the way I was brought up. I was blessed with the power of communities. When my parents arrived in the UK in the '60s from India, they were part of a migration into certain pockets of the UK. In my case, I'm from Birmingham. That's where I saw how wonderful the power of community can be.

When you meet people, you connect with them, you share stories, you cook for each other, and people do remarkable things. That sense of unity and togetherness was special. I was brought up in a community where you stand on each other's shoulders. You don't compete. Everybody wants everybody to have the best dream possible.

Q. What were other early influences that shaped who you are as a leader?

A. It starts with my parents. They dedicated their lives to their work—my mom to the National Health Service, and my father was a bus driver, even when he was 75. They ingrained in us the idea that we're here to serve the many. Coming from an immigrant background, serving the many means affordability, accessibility, and democratizing things so that everyone can experience a better life.

Q. What was a pivotal early leadership lesson for you?

A. Around 2010, I made my first international move with the family. The profound lesson I learned was about adapting to different cultures and the importance of listening, and not just to what people are saying. What are the real words behind the words? What insights were they trying to convey in Japan, China, the Philippines, or Thailand?

Q. You mentioned earlier the importance of sourcing the best talent. How do you hire? What questions do you ask in a job interview, assuming you've already checked the box that they have the skills to do the job?

A. The first thing I go deep on is asking what's important to them. What's their "why?" What's the future that they care about? What research have they done on the company? What inspires them

about the company?

I'm also looking for their ability to tell a story. I think we don't have enough leaders who can explain a growth story to an organization. We have a lot of leaders who talk about activities, objectives, and outcomes, but I want a growth story. You have to be able to capture the imagination of employees and move the organization from a feel and impact perspective.

The third thing that I look for is their ability to go from 10,000 feet to 10 feet. I want to see the strategy in reality. I don't want to see strategy on paper. I'm looking for the 10,000-foot conversation, but then take me down to 10 feet and show me what it looks like in practice.

Q. What do you think is the hardest part of leadership?

A. For me, it's balancing courage, care, and compassion. The world is changing so fast, but you have to be really courageous with your vision and be uncompromising at times. I want to do something transformational. That can be an overused word, but what it means is structurally and consistently changing the trendlines of a business.

You've got to think big, and it takes courage to make those big bets. At the same time, you have to do that with care and compassion. That means that sometimes, you have to be compassionate enough to resolve issues quickly. You can't let talent and people issues fester.

Q. What are the one or two themes that come up most often when you are coaching and mentoring senior executives?

A. It's about how leaders manage in the near-term, the mid-term, and the long-term, and the importance of spending time equally on all three. We have to deliver the quarter, but we also need to have a plan for 2025 and 2028. Balancing those different time horizons doesn't come naturally to a lot of leaders.

Another theme that comes up is that I encourage leaders to spend a lot of time digesting and understanding a problem before they jump to finding a solution. It can be tempting to want to solve something quickly, but you have to go a mile deep on a problem to really understand it first so that you get to the best solution.