



# Howard Bubb'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.

Howard Bubb, an executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group, board member at Napatech, shares his leadership lessons. These include being respectful of the past, honest about the present, optimistic about the future, how to get your board's support, and emphasizing the importance of bringing your team along in your decisions.

### KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

The first one came when I was 27 years old. United Technologies acquired a startup of which I was a key part, and they promoted me to head of that business. That made me the youngest general manager in the history of United Technologies. To help me develop as a leader, they assigned me a mentor, Jay, who had 40 years of experience and was nearing retirement at the company. He taught me, as I was transitioning into general management, that problems may seem easiest to solve on my own, but they are impossible to implement without a team—to hone the ideas, adapt them, and then scale them into successful business solutions.

Later on, when I was running a public company, I was able to put that lesson into full effect by making sure that my focus remained on defining and shaping the problem and helping people identify the characteristics of a winning solution. I also implemented another bit of wisdom that he shared: that the shortest distance between two points may not seem like a straight line. You need to make sure that you invest the time to bring the team along. If people are not engaged in the problem and do not own the solution, then it won't happen.

The second lesson came from my father, a CEO of a large company. When I became the CEO of a public company for the first time, he gathered all the grandchildren together and sat them down at a table with me. He said, "I want you to meet your newest shareholders. I bought them all one share of your company, and they want to have a shareholder meeting." The grandchildren, who ranged in age up to about 13 years old, proceeded to read questions written for them on index cards. And one of the questions was, "You've taken over this small business. How do you intend to make a change? How do you intend to get these people to go in the direction you feel they need to go?"

## **You must be respectful about the past, honest about the present, and optimistic about the future.**

That meeting with the children was a way for my father to teach me that the higher up you get, the more people you report to. And at the highest level, you're responsible to everyone, including the smallest stakeholders. My father also taught me a framework, which I used in one of my early shareholder meetings, that you must be respectful about the past, honest about the present, and optimistic about the future. Now that I've had a chance to do a number of turnarounds, I think the arc of every successful transformation consists of those three things.

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

One common theme is, where should I spend my time? Where are my skills most uniquely valuable? This often comes up when they are in a new executive role and have not realized that doing their prior functional job should be only a small portion of their time. My guideline is that they should spend no more than 30 percent of their time on operational issues. If they are spending more than that, we probably need to talk about their team or processes because something is wrong. People are often surprised when I tell them the 30 percent figure because the main focus in their previous role was keeping the trains running on time. But they need to shift their focus to identifying the problems that need to be addressed, prioritizing them, and building teams to address them. And if the executive is in a C-suite role, then they have to spend more time managing across the organization and building collaborative relationships rather than just managing down.

A big theme with new CEOs is how I get my board behind me. The tenure of CEOs continues to grow shorter, on average, so it's a question that needs some time and attention. But I find that many people take a transactional point of view of the challenge, as if they just want a one-sentence answer. They don't recognize that they need to build a flourishing relationship with their board and understand what the individual directors want for the company and themselves. Why are they on the board? The CEO

needs to treat them as if they were customers. And the CEO needs to get the board to understand where management wants to take the company. In short, they need to manage the board's expectations—first understand their views, then set their expectations for the company, make sure everyone's on board with them, manage them over time, and ultimately deliver on them. And, of course, tell them when the expectations have been met or exceeded by celebrating. Believe it or not, some people find that last step the hardest because it involves getting the board to function as a team that shares management's goals and expectations.