



Leading Means Making Difficult Decisions. You're Not Going to Please Everyone.

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Margaret Burke, Principal, Firmwide Talent Acquisition & Development Leader at PwC, shares her practical lessons with The ExCo Group's CEO, David Reimer, and Senior Managing Director and Partner, Adam Bryant, on building and grooming leaders, why she thinks confrontation doesn't have to be bad, and other leadership insights.

Reimer: You've been in the role of building and grooming leaders for a while now. What are the two or three constants that have remained vital for leaders, and what has changed?

Burke: One of the constants of leading is communication, particularly clarity around goals and strategy. When leaders don't provide that clarity, the difference is striking. Now let's shift to what changes. When I came into my first human capital leadership role, the market conditions were tough. It was around 2008, the market wasn't great, and those conditions can send your best leaders into more of an operational mode. You always have to have the North Star and remind people of the big-picture strategy even as you're making adjustments.

In a growth market, your challenges are altogether different. The hiring market is more competitive. You need to focus on your recruiting engine. You have to focus a lot on your employee experience so that people will want to join your company and learn and not leave. When markets are good, you have to be able to move with speed and agility without compromising quality. You have to make sure your leaders don't lose sight of that and that they are constantly innovating and looking around

corners for what's next for the business.

Bryant: What were important early influences that really shaped your leadership style?

Burke: I'm a very competitive person. I always have been. My parents didn't really have to put pressure on me to do well in school because I put so much pressure on myself. I am also the youngest in our family, so sometimes you have to fight for a little more attention. I took that approach into my career, as well. I always had the mentality that there was nothing I couldn't do. I applied for jobs I wasn't qualified for. When I went for my first human capital job, I had no experience in the field, but I convinced the partners to hire me.

Reimer: What themes come up most often when you are giving mentoring advice to leaders?

Burke: Leaders often want to please everybody, and they want to be liked. That's where our leaders can get tripped up. Leading means making difficult decisions and doing things that are not going to please everyone. In fact, if you are pleasing everyone, then you're not making the hard decisions.

I've also had conversations with leaders who are driving way too hard and not bringing people along with them or helping to develop their teams. I've done a lot of coaching, especially with newer leaders, about how we are so much better and stronger when we collaborate as a team, even though sometimes it's easier to go at it alone. It's important for leaders to model that teamwork for the rest of the organization.

Bryant: Since the pandemic, we've seen a lot of shifting expectations about work among employees. What's your take?

Burke: I'm focused a lot right now on the idea of apprenticeship and what that means today. When I came out of school, I was learning on the job all the time at the office, whether it was stopping people in the hallway or walking down to their office. Now, it is so different. We have people who have joined this firm who don't go into the office and who aren't getting together with their teams because the clients don't need or want them onsite.

It's just a completely different way of learning, and it is up to us to define what apprenticeship means now. We all have a role to play. I have to be an active learner, but I also have to be an active teacher. We have to integrate that more into our career models. We're very good at assessing people on how well they do their job, but we need to do better at assessing people on how they teach others and how well they've learned themselves. We don't hold them accountable for learning the way that I think we're going to have to in the future to make sure that our people are getting the skills they need.

A final point about expectations is that I find people want them very clearly laid out for them—for example, whether they need a particular project finished tonight, whether it can wait until the morning, or when they need to be in the office. People want that guidance laid out in what I call "Peter Rabbit English" more than ever before.

Reimer: Do you have an opinion about what skills can't be taught because you're born with them or not?

Burke: It's really hard to teach drive. I think that's something that is inherent. Another thing that can't be taught is whether you like what you're doing. If you like what you're doing, typically, you're going to do it a lot better. And if you like the people you're doing it with, that's kind of the cherry on top, and

I think that makes you like the work that you're doing even more. A bad task can be so much better when you're doing it with great people and when you're doing it under a strong leader.

Bryant: One of the through-lines of this conversation is that you like to be direct with people. Have you always been that way?

Burke: I always say that I'm very confrontational. That often has such a negative connotation to it, but confrontation doesn't have to be bad, and people usually feel better after you've talked through something with them. I can't rest easy unless I've gotten whatever is bothering me off my chest.

If someone isn't performing well, I have to tell them because, otherwise, I feel like I'm cheating them by not sharing that with them. Yes, sometimes feelings get hurt, but if you know it's coming from a good place and that I want you to be better, there's no reason to feel hurt.

Reimer: What is the best lesson you learned from your worst manager?

Burke: I don't like it when people take credit for things that they didn't do. I've seen leaders—not too many, fortunately—who try to lift themselves up by bringing other people down. Because of my competitive personality, I made sure that when that happened to me, I was going to get credit the next time. Those experiences made me very aware of the importance of bringing people along with you. Even if they played a minor role in a project, give them recognition and credit because it gives people confidence.