



# Leadership Should Unleash The Founder In All Of Us So That Everyone Can Solve Problems

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***René Lacerte, CEO and founder of BILL, a financial operations platform for small and midsize businesses, shares insightful lessons and stories about how his leadership style is unleashing “the founder in all of us.” This interview is part of our Art of Leading interview series with The ExCo Group’s Adam Bryant.***

Q. What are the three values that define your leadership style?

A. The first one is that I feel like my job is to enable everyone to be the best version of themselves, and so authenticity is one of the values we have as a company. I want to make sure that whatever structure we put in place doesn’t confine people to be somebody different.

Humility is another principle. I want to make sure that we’re always listening and trying to learn from others, whether it’s customers, colleagues, board members, or investors. A third cornerstone is making sure that the passion comes alive for people. When people are energized and connected to the company in a deep, meaningful way, they put more energy into it.

Q. Authenticity is one of those words that means different things to different people. What does it mean to you?

A. Authenticity can’t ever impose on others. I have my views on things, but I have to allow room for

somebody else to have different views. Let's say we're talking about politics or some broader issue in society. The approach should be that this is how I feel about it, but others are free to think differently, and they should think differently.

I'll share a story as to why I think it's important. I was born in Virginia, but we moved to Florida when I was about 10. A woman named Mary, who was a sharecropper's daughter, helped my mom out around the house when she wasn't doing her other jobs cleaning. She worked for my folks for maybe 20 years. When Mary retired, my Mom and Dad took her out to lunch in town and gave her a retirement gift.

This restaurant was famous for its coconut cream pie. Mary ordered it, and my dad didn't order dessert. At one point, he said to her, "Mary, do you mind if I have a bite?" And she said, "No, Mr. Lacerte, that'd be fine, but I don't have a spoon for you." He said, "That's okay," and he used her spoon to take a bite. She started crying. She was 70 years old, and her whole life, she couldn't be who she wanted to be. She didn't feel comfortable sharing a spoon with a white person because a white person had never offered to eat off her spoon.

You think about people who have to spend their lives keeping things bottled up inside. The point of authenticity for me is that I don't want anybody to have baggage. I want them to come in and be who they are as long as it doesn't impose on other people. What is offensive to me is when people try to force their views on others. I want people to bring their experiences into work so that we have different perspectives because I always try to avoid groupthink. Having people be able to share and feel comfortable is super important to me.

Q. What were the important early influences that shaped who you are today?

A. My parents and grandparents were entrepreneurs, and they ran about half a dozen businesses each. I had a lot of early experiences going to the office with my mom and dad, talking about business at dinner, and just seeing the impact that they were able to have on the lives of employees and customers.

I could just hear the excitement in their voices, but I also heard stress. Starting and running a business isn't for the faint of heart. I saw that, but I don't think I ever saw them more alive than when they were solving a problem for their customers or for their employees. That stayed with me.

I didn't plan to be an entrepreneur originally. In fact, my dad didn't encourage entrepreneurship because it is hard. The difference was that I moved to Silicon Valley and had access to venture capital. Every business he started was with his own money. I did start both of my businesses with my own money, but I put six months in and then somebody else funded the rest. He had to fund his businesses his whole life.

I also saw an acceptance of risk. And one of the ways you manage risk is you work hard to beat it. I saw that grit in my dad, in business and in other aspects of his life. He was born with six fingers—four on his left hand and two on his right. He played trumpet, but he wanted to play piano, except nobody would teach him piano because he only had six fingers.

When he was 16, his parents bought him a piano, and he taught himself. He played eight hours a day, and built callouses, and figured it out. When you see that you can manage risk with working hard, it makes you more comfortable with risk. You have to respect it. It's real, and you have to be humble, but grit makes a huge difference.

Q. How would you complete the sentence, “The hardest part of leadership is...”?

A. The hardest part of leadership is knowing that you don’t have all the answers and that your job is to bring out better answers. It’s about unleashing the founder in all of us by creating a great structure and system so that everybody can solve problems, not just me. So, to me, the hardest part of management is creating a culture of founders. That’s something that I work hard at. You’re never done with that work.

Q. You’ve no doubt done a ton of mentoring and coaching over the years of senior executives. What are the themes that come up most often?

A. One of the strengths of my leadership is intentionality—thinking out in years if not decades. That can be hard for people to do, so I often push people to consider what they really want in the future and then work back to start solving that problem. What are the key levers that would make a difference in reaching that goal? Achieving greatness requires intentionality. It requires constantly self-evaluating how you grow, and you have to have a growth mindset. You can’t assume you know everything.

You have to have a passion to take on hard goals and then be comfortable with hard goals not being met. I mentor people about the idea of constructive dissatisfaction. You should be dissatisfied, but only constructively. I’m never satisfied, but I’m happy, so that’s an interesting dichotomy. I always have something to work on. Just dissatisfaction without being constructive is useless.