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Former CHRO of CIA Hering; Board Chair of the People and Culture Committee at Sistema B Brazil

Alessandra da Costa Morrison's Leadership Lessons | ExCo Insights

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In this series, we explore some of the most important lessons and insights from our executive coaches and mentors.

Alessandra da Costa Morrison, an executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group, board chair of the People and Culture Committee at Sistema B Brazil, and the former CHRO of CIA Hering, shares her leadership lessons. These include how to role-model transparency, ask the right questions, and provoke meaningful conversations.

KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

The first lesson is that if you want to have a transparent relationship with a colleague, you must role-model transparency. If you want openness, you have to be open. And if you want to move from more of a transactional conversation to a more meaningful conversation, then it's up to you to ask the good questions to get there.

I learned this lesson when I applied for a job early in my career, and I was sure that I would not stay for very long because I intended to do an MBA abroad. So I started the conversation with my future boss, saying, "I have this plan, which means I'm probably going to be here for a maximum of two years." She was impressed by the level of honesty that I brought to the conversation, and I ended up being hired. I took the same approach in other situations—including telling people about the countries

where I wanted to work or that I was trying to get pregnant around the same time I was interviewing for a CHRO job—and I always got the same feedback, which was that people were impressed by my honesty. And so I've used this approach in all my leadership roles. I believe that when we intentionally start out with a goal of having more meaningful conversations, then we can get much more out of those relationships.

The second lesson is that when you put a team together with the right intention and very high ambition, you can achieve almost anything. I learned that lesson while I was working at J&J. We had a CEO who was very creative, had a very good relationship with everybody in the company, and he was always challenging us to do more and to think outside the box.

When he pulled our leadership team together, we challenged ourselves to grow 10 times bigger in 10 years. That was, of course, very challenging for us. And was that even achievable? He explained that if we set the bar at 10, we might reach eight. But if we set the bar to two, we're probably only going to reach two. Because of that higher bar, we developed some new solutions and approaches that were very innovative for us.

If you want a transparent relationship with a colleague, you must role-model the transparency.

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? One theme that comes up often is helping my clients to build stakeholder relationships. It may seem obvious, but many people who move up quickly in their careers can become so focused on the results that they work only with their teams and bosses. With that kind of vertical focus, leaders can sometimes forget or not pay enough attention to creating partnerships with their peers.

So, I advise my clients first to map those relationships into three different spheres. The first is those people whose help they need to perform their job. The second is people they can learn from—and they can be inside or outside their company. The third category is people who can help them grow and advance in their careers, including internal mentors and sponsors. Those are three very different kinds of conversations. And when we look at those three categories, I will ask my clients what they need to do to build those relationships and then make time for them.

Another common theme comes with clients moving into more complex or bigger jobs. They, of course, have to get to know their team, assess the talent, and define their critical goals and objectives. But beyond those, I've been inviting my clients to reflect on what legacy they want to leave behind in that new job when it comes time to move on to another one. Because, at that level, they are in the kinds of roles where their leadership style can have an impact on their legacy.

But sometimes people still want to do their old job once they move into a bigger role. They have trouble letting go of what they used to do, and they should be delegating that work to their teams. I help them focus on being the leader that they want to be based on their position. I ask them to reflect on role models they work with or have worked with. What are your values? How would you like those values to show up in your work? Questions like that help set a tone for how they want to lead beyond delivering results.