



Don H. Liu

Former EVP, Chief Legal & Risk Officer at Target Corporation;
Former EVP & General Counsel at Xerox

Don H. Liu'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.

Don H. Liu, an executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group, former EVP, Chief Legal and Risk Officer at Target Corporation, and former EVP and General Counsel at Xerox, shares his leadership lessons. These lessons highlight the importance of networking, how to navigate the perpetual foreigner syndrome, and a reminder that there are worse things in life than being fired.

KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

When I spoke at a recent conference, I was asked, “Have you ever been in trouble, and if so, what did you learn from that experience?” Probably the one and only time when I almost got fired was early on in my career. I was number two in the legal department of a company, and my CEO, for some reason that I never understood, got really upset at me for something, and he told my boss that I should be fired. I went to my boss to ask him what I should do. He said, just keep your head down, and maybe he’ll forget or forgive you. But the CEO didn’t, and so I spoke to my boss, the general counsel, again and said, “Why don’t I just say I’m sorry and ask him to give me another chance?”

My boss then asked me, “Do you really believe that?” I said, “Actually, no. I don’t know what he’s upset about. I just want to save my job.” And he then gave me one of the most important lessons of

my career when he said, “Don, there are worse things in life than getting fired.” I said, “Do you have any idea what it took to get here and what my parents, who are first-generation immigrants, sacrificed for my benefit? I think I’d rather die.” And he said, “This is not going to be obvious until later in your career. But the minute you start worrying about your job, then you can’t do your job anymore.”

The impact that had on me was profound, and I developed a reputation over my career for being fearless, always speaking my mind, and telling people what they need to hear, not what they want to hear.

There was another lesson from that experience because it turned out that the person who was my regular lunchmate in the company cafeteria was close to the CEO, and he vouched for me to the CEO. He told him that I was probably one of the best hires he had ever made and that he would be sorry if I walked.

So, the lesson is that people often underestimate the amount of networking they should do in a corporate environment. Because you never know who’s going to be an important friend for you. You’ve got to build your base ahead of time so that you can rely on them when you need allies.

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

One common theme is that there can be a misalignment between what they want to do and what the team needs from them. The executive may be working very hard, focusing on the things they think are the right priorities. But very often, the people around them don’t really appreciate all the work they are doing because they are not the things that the team needs from the executive. And that can be frustrating, because the executive may feel like they are not being appreciated for all the work they are doing.

And so when I’m coaching those executives, I will often ask them some questions, such as, “Are you spending time on those things because you really like doing them or because you’re really good at them? And if either of those are the reasons, are they the right reasons to be focusing your energies there? Is there a possibility that what your team needs from you may not be your strengths?” The lesson is that you have to be able to tackle those things that you may not be good at or that you don’t like doing.

The second piece of advice often comes up with people I’m coaching who have an ethnic background, like me. Years ago, when I was giving a speech to a group of about 100 Asian-American mid-level executives at Xerox, I talked about the “perpetual foreigner syndrome.” When people look at me, they assume I just got off the boat, even though I’ve lived in the United States for most of my life.

So, I’ve learned to quickly take that impression off the table and show people that I’m relatable. Learn about American culture—whether it’s football or other things—so that you can take part in conversations before meetings start and in other social situations at work. There is a way to do that so that you are true to yourself but still find common ground with people. I’ll acknowledge the tension, but the two ideas are not necessarily inconsistent with each other. You don’t want people to stereotype you based on where you grew up. Don’t let people put you in a box.