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Jeannie Diefenderfer'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.

Jeannie Diefenderfer, an executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group, independent director at DigitalBridge Group and Irth, and the former SVP of Global Engineering and Planning at Verizon, shares her leadership lessons. These include focusing on impacting the people you lead, understanding that leaders are storytellers, and paying attention to the “why” of people’s behavior.

KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

Earlier in my career, I was focused more on my individual accomplishments and managing how people above me would perceive me as I executed my plan. But as I started to have larger organizations and more people under me, what became clear was that what mattered more was my focus on impacting the people I was leading and who depended on me.

I didn’t learn this lesson overnight. I realized over time that if the frontline employee who was seven layers below me did something that impacted one of my biggest customers, then it was the equivalent of me doing that work from a customer’s point of view. So, I started to pay closer attention to what I

said to employees, who I said it to, and how I behaved with my people. I realized that people learn by watching me more than listening to me because behavior is everything. And I learned that I had to listen deeply to people at every level of my organization to understand what they were trying to accomplish. I wanted to know what was in their way and then try to help every employee, particularly those who touched our customers.

A second key lesson for me was about clarity of communication in words and actions. I believe I'm a pretty good communicator, and I follow up with the right behaviors. Even so, I learned that I often underestimated the power of my position. Everything I did was much more powerful, in terms of the shadow I cast, than I thought. For example, when you're conditioned as a leader to be super busy, sometimes you can mistake being busy with producing results. I realized that my behavior was actually spilling over into my team, and my organization started to copy me. We were all running around being very busy without understanding if it had a positive impact.

I needed to intentionally pause and say, What are we trying to accomplish? So, I started using quarterly webcasts with my tens of thousands of employees to succinctly convey the messages. And you have to repeat things the same way, and you can't use complicated words. When you use different words, things get interpreted differently. As leaders, we are storytellers. I learned that if you don't have a clear and simple story, a story will still get told, and it may not be the one you want.

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

We often discuss the difference between description and prescription and why that distinction is important for how they work with their teams. As leaders, we are conditioned to believe that we're doing a better and more expeditious job by being prescriptive—telling people what to do—because we think that helps to develop our leaders. But when we do that, you may get faster results in the short-term, but you don't get the long-term sustainable results because you're not allowing the leader to develop the prescription themselves. A better approach is to describe the outcome you want and let the leader come up with the prescription for achieving that goal.

A second theme that comes up often is the importance of paying attention to the "why" of people's behavior. Most of us got to where we are because of our experience and the skills we have built over time. But that can come with this tendency to rationalize and bucketize people into boxes that we've created, and this often has limiting effects on our ability to understand the motives of others, especially those who disagree with us or misunderstand us. That misses an opportunity to dig deeper into what is really motivating them, which may be something completely different from what we believe. And unless you dig deeper, you will never know what they are really thinking. We can really underestimate the value of time and attention that we give to our colleagues. You have to make time for those conversations, and freeing up space on our calendar is not that easy. Something we do is to have a rigorous look at all the meetings that consume everyone's schedule to see which ones are truly necessary and which are more about checking the box.