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Niren Chaudhary's Leadership Lessons | ExCo Insights

Monday, January 6, 2025

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

Niren Chaudhary, an executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group and former Chairman and CEO of Panera Brands, Inc., as well as the previous COO and President of Krispy Kreme Doughnuts, Inc., shares his leadership lessons. These include the importance of being a lifelong learner, closing the gap between intent versus impact, and the strong relationship between thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

The first is the importance of being a lifelong learner. Just when you think you know something, a new door opens and you realize that what you knew is no longer relevant. I believe in this ongoing cycle of learning, including unlearning and then relearning. It requires you to have an innate sense of curiosity and a beginner's mindset in every conversation and in every situation. Being a leader is about having a strong point of view, but I've realized that leaders must have strong convictions that are loosely held.

I've worked across 50 countries and lived in six continents. As I've scaled global brands across different countries and different cultures, I had to use this process of learning, unlearning, and relearning.

First, I needed to make the brand more locally relevant and accessible. With food, it meant adapting to local tastes and flavors. What excites our consumers? And then, as the brand reaches a certain momentum, you actually have to dial that back and focus more on what is your global brand proposition. And then as you do that, and the brand starts to reach maturity, you have to once again open up another dialogue of meaningful innovation to serve the consumer in different ways. It's a never-ending cycle.

The second lesson is that we're all told to be aware of our weaknesses. But I have realized that when I have failed, it is usually more on account of my strengths—when they are overplayed and unchecked—rather than my weaknesses. Does that mean we should change who we are? Absolutely not, because our strengths define who we are in a unique fashion. However, you have to be aware and beware of what the strength could be if it is overplayed or unchecked.

For example, one of my strengths is that I love people—I care for them, and I'm deeply committed to them. I can build deep engagement and connections and inspire people to go beyond what they

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think is possible. So that's all good. But if the strength is overplayed, it can mean that I might take too long to exit people when they should be taken out of the organization. Or I might take what someone is saying to me at face value, even though they might have an agenda, which removes me further from the reality of a particular situation. So, you put some checks and balances in place. In my case, I would cultivate a tribe of truth-tellers in the organization. You can always spot these people because they are fearless, and they tell you things exactly as they are and how they see them.

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

The first common theme is around intent versus impact—the person is not showing up in the way they intend. It is a lifelong journey for many of us to try to close that gap between what our intent is and how we show up to other people through our behaviors. To share that kind of feedback, it's important to get past the person's feeling of being criticized. You have to depersonalize it so that the person understands that the feedback is about their behavior, not who they are as a person. It's a classic problem with high-potential executives—they want to get ahead, and they have good intentions, but they are showing up in ways that lead people to have different perceptions of them. When you discuss behaviors in terms of what's observable, then it becomes more objective and more actionable.

The second common theme is about having difficult conversations with people on their teams. They often don't know how to have those conversations when there is a conflict that needs to be resolved. But I always tell them that conflict is a good thing because it can create a breakthrough in relationships. So, I share with my clients my mental model of a triangular relationship between thoughts, feelings, and behavior. You think, you feel, and you do, always in that sequence. I encourage my clients to have inner clarity and external empathy. Inner clarity is saying, Okay, what happened? How did I feel? How did I behave? And then, you use external empathy to put yourself in the other person's shoes. What might they be thinking, feeling, and doing? Once you have that inner clarity and external empathy, you have a process for sharing how you see the world through your lens, understanding the other person, and moving forward to a good collective outcome.