



'Being A Leader Is About Seeing The Possible'

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Kim Crawford Goodman, chief executive of Smarsh, a provider of communications compliance technology, shares her key leadership insights. 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 really define your leadership playbook?

A. In this era of rapid advancements in technology, and with so much competition, you have to be excellent if you're going to win. The second big word for me is integrity. I am a down-to-earth, approachable, honest, decent, God-fearing person. And that does not change when I walk into a boardroom, a C-suite, or meet with an employee or client. I always show up the same. I'm going to be honest and fair, and you can count on my word.

The third thing to know about me is the importance of innovation. First and foremost, I consider myself a technologist. I'm a Stanford-trained engineer, and when I was a consultant, I worked in telecom and technology. When I was in college, we started out using typewriters, and by junior year, we were all using a PC. So I've lived through an incredible amount of advancement in technology. I've led winning companies, but I've also seen companies go from the top of the mountain to the bottom. You have to innovate in order to win in this day and age.

Q. What were some early influences that really shaped who you are as a leader today?

A. I was born and raised on the south side of Chicago, and I had a really wonderful and strong family. My mom and dad were married well over 60 years, and they were both incredible people. My dad didn't go to college. He was a vending man who filled candy and soda machines, but he also was on the school board. He was a force. He was in the choir for 40 years. He was a national officer of one of our national Catholic organizations. I just had really strong family influences, and my parents raised me with a sense of possibility and ambition. I remember in fourth grade saying that I wanted to be the Pope when I grew up.

They always breathed into me capability, drive, and belief, but they also warned me that succeeding in my career was not going to be easy. They believed in me, and so did the nuns and priests, the teachers in my Catholic school, and other parents, as well. I stood on the broad shoulders of people who just poured everything into me. I've tried to make the most of that for them and me.

Q. Were you in leadership roles early on?

A. Yes. If there was a student council, I was running for it. We had a nationwide African American Catholic organization called "The Knights of Peter Claver," and in high school, I was the president of the nationwide group for young women. I was the president of the Black Organization of Students in my high school, and I was one of the student body presidents at Stanford in my last year. It's who I am and what I do.

Q. What were some key leadership lessons that you learned early in your career?

A. A pivotal one came when I was a new manager at Bain & Company. I had a couple of people working for me, and we were given a hard project late in the day with a very tight deadline. We were going to have to work late into the night, and I went into the room with the attitude of, "Why do we have to do this? Why does it have to be tonight? Why is the client being so particular?" As soon as I said that, the two people who worked for me totally went into the tank and started doubting whether we could even get it done.

I learned a lesson then that being a leader is about seeing the possible. It's about finding a way even when the way looks difficult. It's bringing not just insight but also an infectious energy. As the leader, if you go high, everybody's coming with you. And if you go low, everybody's coming with you there, too. That was a huge lesson for me.

I also learned an important lesson at a program at Bain for women consultants to help us improve our leadership style and influence. One of the discussions was around the question, "How do you command a room?" They had us do an exercise to think about somebody we knew who commands a room and then simply start acting like them ourselves. In my case, it happened to be a blond, blue-eyed guy who was just magnetic and savvy about commanding a room.

Q. So, what's the playbook if you were teaching someone how to do that?

A. First, you've got to know your stuff before you walk into the room. You've got to be as thorough, current, and deep on the topic at hand as anybody in the room. Second, you've got to listen well. Because owning a room is not about what you came in to say—it's about what can be productively achieved during the conversation. So be a facilitator, not just a talker. You have to find meaningful places to get into the conversation. And finally, have the confidence that you deserve a seat at that table.

Q. When you coach executives, what are some common themes that come up, and what advice do you share with them?

A. The first piece of advice I share is that you have to know your own goals and objectives, and they have to be specific to you. Sometimes, people are striving for generic success. But success is defined by who you really are and what you really want to achieve. Am I delighted to be a CEO? Yes, I am. Do I love the job? Yes, I do. Is it the ultimate symbol of success for me? No, it's not. What I came to understand about myself is that I love leading teams and inspiring them to do innovative and breakthrough things.

The second theme that comes up often is the importance of persevering in the face of disappointment. Careers are never a straight line up and to the right. Your career will have lots of ups and downs. Mine certainly has. You're going to encounter surprises, obstacles, disappointment, unfairness, and bad luck. But you have to stay focused, persevere, be flexible, and figure things out.

The third thing I often tell people is that there simply is no substitute for raw, hard work. That's not a new concept. However, I do find that people sometimes need to be reminded that high levels of success require incredibly high levels of dedication and hard work. Yes, there are going to be some people who find shortcuts to moving up. But if you want to be reliably good and reliably capable, you cannot let up.