



Vivien Yeung'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.

Vivien Yeung, executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group, board member at Jack in the Box, Inc., and Open Window School, and former EVP and Chief Strategy Officer of Kohl's Corporation, shares her leadership lessons. These include the power of making people feel seen, learning to be authentic to yourself, and approaching conversations with kindness, compassion, and respect.

KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

A lesson I learned early in my career was the power of making people feel seen and understood. When I was a young strategist at Starbucks, I really loved my job, but there was a lot of work to do, and I dedicated a lot of weekend and evening time to the role. One day, out of the blue, my husband received a personal letter from our CEO, Jim Donald. In that letter, he talked about the importance of the work I was doing for the company's future. He also thanked my husband for his support of my career and for allowing me to dedicate my time and energy to the company.

We were completely flabbergasted by the gesture—to think that a CEO of a major company would reach four levels down into the organization, take the time to figure out who their spouse was and

write a personal letter. That was way beyond our expectations. I don't remember anything about my compensation at the time or whether I made a bonus or not that year. But my husband and I will always remember the feeling that the company's leadership cared about us.

I've tried to model my own leadership style after that, through small gestures and finding occasions to acknowledge and celebrate people and to make them feel that I see them and understand them. That might be giving a new employee a hug to make sure that they feel that they belong or organizing a surprise promotion party for a colleague. When people tell their stories about their leaders, most of the time, it's about these personal touches.

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The second lesson, which I wish I had learned much earlier than I did, is to be authentic to yourself. The earlier a leader can find and embrace their true selves, the earlier they can develop from that authentic place and lead from that authentic place. I was born and raised in Hong Kong, and English is not my first language. When I started working in consulting, I got feedback about my communication and presentation style. People wanted me to speak up and hear more from me. They were trying to help me and develop me because I'm also an introvert. The feedback came from a good place, but it had the opposite effect, which was to make me much more self-conscious in meetings.

Instead of fully engaging in what was happening in the meeting, I started to think about how I needed to speak up more. It wasn't until years later that I realized I couldn't be anyone but myself. And that included sharing with other people that I'm introverted, and I'm good with that. My English is always going to come with an accent, and my grammar will never be perfect. Once I acknowledged that, I felt a huge weight lifted off my shoulders, and from that point on, I felt that I could more fully express myself. In a funny and roundabout way, by acknowledging who I am, I became more of the person that I tried so hard to be.

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

One theme that often comes up is the timing and approach to having difficult conversations. Whether it's a performance conversation with a team member or talking to a manager or a board member who is not aligned with the overall strategy, people often find ways to delay having those conversations. Or if they do have the discussion, it's often in a roundabout way to avoid impacting the relationship.

So, I work with clients on how to approach those conversations with kindness, compassion, and respect, even on very difficult topics. And those things are not in conflict. You can have the most kind and compassionate conversation, for example, to let someone know that they don't belong in the organization. The consistent feedback I get from my clients after they have those conversations is that they were not as hard as they thought they would be and that they wish that they had them sooner than they did.

Another theme is setting the context with stakeholders to receive a message about a strategic or organizational change. I find that leaders can have very clear ideas about what their vision is and what

their strategies are, but their stakeholders are in different places. Because they were not involved in the work that led to the change, they needed to be brought along.

So, I work with my clients to intentionally think about the mindsets and emotional needs of those in the room and meet them where they are. This type of preparation also allows the leader to be more empathetic walking into the room so they can pick up signals about what people might be thinking and then address those concerns or needs directly. That might mean storytelling to help people understand the need for change. Sometimes, it is about being vulnerable and acknowledging that things are going to be a little messy and that not everyone is going to agree at first. There are different tactics you can use to make people feel at ease so they can fully participate and not get hung up on exactly who said what in the moment.