Sarah Diamond

Board Member and Advisor;
Former Global MD of Financial Services of IBM
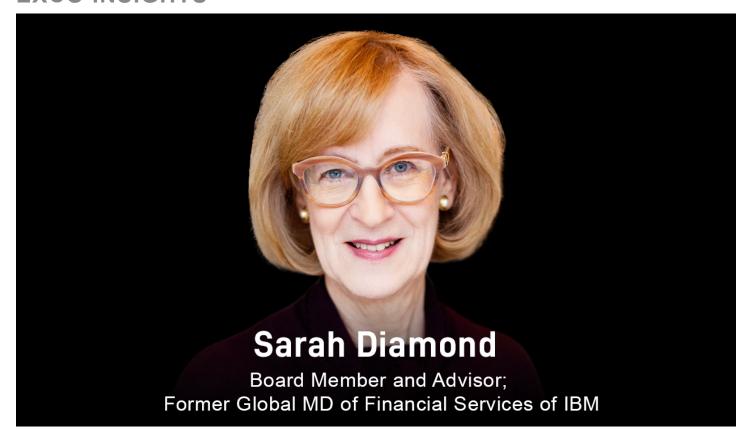
Sarah Diamond's Leadership Lessons | ExCo Insights

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

Sarah Diamond, an executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group, board member and advisor and the former Global Managing Director of Financial Services, IBM, shares her leadership lessons— emphasizing the importance of being true to oneself, leveraging self-awareness, and having the humility to ask for help.

KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

The first one is about the importance of being true to myself and understanding which of my characteristics or traits I want to rely on in leadership contexts to maximize the impact. The obvious flip side of that is identifying what I used to think of as weaknesses but now call gaps. For me, the gaps were needing to be more comfortable asking for help and surrounding myself with people whose strengths could complement my gaps and vice versa.

To arrive at that point, I had to leverage self-awareness, including being honest with myself and having the humility to ask for help when I need it. There was a point in my career, for example, when I took a big leap into the technology world even though I didn't have a technology background. I had

to find people who could balance me and would be more effective in certain roles. Along the way, I discovered that a culture of diversity on my teams becomes a very natural and powerful byproduct of the search for different skills, backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences.

A second lesson is about how the respect and trust of teams is critical. I had to learn not to confuse respect for being liked. Many leaders think they need to be liked. I'm not opposed to that but popularity can't be the first objective. More important, you have to be trusted and respected. Over my career, I had to work through some tough circumstances, including the credit crisis. In later years, I had to lead a radical reskilling of our workforce to be able to meet the rapid changes in the technology world. Those were some hard lessons, and I learned that if I had to make the tough decisions, not everybody would like them. But if I did it with the right level of respect, transparency, and honesty in terms of the reasons behind the decisions, then people would accept it.

> ## "Respect and trust are critical in leadership, but don't confuse respect with being liked. Popularity can't be the first objective."

Many people resist change for as long as they can. But if you really understand where those gaps are in terms of people's understanding of a situation, then you can help people along to understand it intuitively. That's where a lot of initiatives fall apart, because leaders haven't really closed that gap by providing clarity and personal engagement. It's easy, and even understandable, for a leader to want to paint the most positive view of where you're going. But much better, in my experience, is to start with the reality that people are facing, and then show a coherent and plausible path for how you're going to get to your goals.

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

One common theme, as people move into senior leadership positions, is maintaining the right balance between strategic and operational aspects of the business. Often they've achieved a lot of success in their career because of their operational chops and their ability to get things done. But as you move up, the challenge becomes, how do I scale? The challenge I see is that more junior leaders can struggle with knowing when to go deep and when to have others go deep for them—in effect, when to be tactical and when to be strategic. You have to be able to see the whole playing field and learn how to leverage the organization. I asked a client, who recently was given a very senior promotion, "How are you getting the organization to work for you?" It's not just about you working for the organization.

The second theme is the importance of developing, sustaining, and really using a network. It's self-evident that every new career step causes the span of your network to expand. But what I've found is that clients often really struggle to spend a consistent amount of time extending and then leveraging their networks. And by extending, I mean going outside your own function or department and building your network across the company and even across industries. Strong and actively managed networks aren't just nice to have; they're foundational to your effectiveness and impact. I have found that while nobody disagrees with this idea in principle, it often doesn't come naturally. I encounter many very senior leaders who still need to continue to develop this ability.