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# Karen Vander Linde's Leadership Lessons

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

**Karen Vander Linde, an executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group and former Global Practice Leader at PwC**, shares her leadership lessons—emphasizing the importance of leading through coalitions, “If you want to run fast, run alone. If you want to run far, run together,” and planting seeds for future fruition.

### KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

I learned early in my career that leading through coalitions can really be a game changer. Many years ago, I was asked to build a business in a new part of the firm. I went through the interview process with the top leaders, and they all said, “Yes, you can get started.” Then we had a new leader come on board, and building the business was put on hold until he could approve it.

I decided that, as long as I’m waiting, why not work on the strategy for the business? So I developed a one-pager, and started sharing it with my colleagues across the US and even internationally. Ultimately, I interviewed about 50 partners to get their feedback, and I kept refining the strategy after each of those conversations. That process also helped me develop an execution plan.

By the time I met with the new leader, I had not only a fully fleshed-out strategy and execution plan, but also 50 colleagues who knew what I was trying to do and opened market doors for me. That business blossomed and still thrives today. It was a lesson captured in an African proverb a client shared with me: “If you want to run fast, run alone. If you want to run far, run together.”

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Another key lesson was about the importance of being courageous. I’ve always been a bit of an organizational rebel, but I learned that I had to be courageous with grace. It wasn’t just a matter of shouting in the wilderness. The question is, how can I deliver my idea in a way that draws people in? And the key insight here again is about the importance of building coalitions. Even with ideas that might have seemed like non-starters, I found that when I socialized them with my colleagues, many of them agreed with me, which helped me win support for my ideas when I eventually presented them to the top of the house. I wasn’t the lone voice in the wilderness.

Sometimes, it’s about planting seeds. There have been examples of ideas that I was pushing that only came to fruition years later. And in other cases, some ideas never took hold, perhaps because the timing wasn’t right. I’ve never regretted standing up for what I thought was the right thing to do. But I learned to advocate for those ideas in ways that didn’t alienate people and that allowed me to be true to myself. That’s a very important feature in leaders today, because too often we say, “Be bold and courageous,” but then the hierarchy creates some timidity. Leaders can’t let that hierarchy squash creativity and courage.

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

I have found over the years that detailed, positive feedback for leaders can often be transformational. But they often don’t hear that kind of feedback, and instead just get something more generic like “good job.” In our coaching work, we do a lot of interviews and assessments of clients. As I share the results with them, they are often surprised when they hear how much others appreciate their strengths, the impact they are having, and their value in the organization.

That feedback can be a powerful reinforcement of their approach, and it can also make the leader reflect on the fact that they may not be making the most of their strengths in their current role and should make a shift to a different role. Another benefit of using a positive-feedback approach is that the leaders become more open to suggestions about ways in which they can improve and feel more confident going forward. Some leaders want to focus on just their areas for improvement, but it’s also important to build on your laurels, not just rest on them. In order to do that, you need to know your strengths.

Another common theme is helping leaders go beyond their technical skills and learn how to work better with and through people to get things done. With leadership, it’s the soft skills that are the hard skills you need to master to be a great leader. So many challenges require those softer skills, whether it’s aligning your team, working with your board, simplifying and communicating a clear strategy,

dealing with a poor performer, leveraging a top performer, or managing up, down, and sideways more effectively.

These are all people issues. And what leaders often don't realize is that they can address a people issue just like they would address a technical issue. The scientific method still applies. What are the causes? What are potential solutions? What's a hypothesis? If we fail, how do we regroup, learn from what went wrong, and then try again? I definitely think we can coach people on specific approaches to help them reach, influence, and enable others more effectively.