



# Companies Have A Unique Opportunity Now To Reimagine and Transform Themselves

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**Eric Kutcher, Senior Partner and Chair, North America, McKinsey & Company, shares his key leadership insights on reimagining business with AI, building trust through vulnerability, and leading with a coaching mindset in this Art of Leading interview with The ExCo Group's Adam Bryant.**

**Q. What are the three or four things that are really core to your leadership playbook?**

**A.** When you become a leader, you have to shift into coach mode as opposed to player mode. I was a former athlete. As a coach, your job is to figure out how to put a team on the field. Sometimes that means putting new players on the field. How do you think about the existing players? And how do you think about that in a way that complements you? One has to know their own strengths and weaknesses as a leader to build a successful team.

Second is to make sure there is clarity of mission. What is it that we collectively are trying to do? What are the really difficult things we've got to get done? Part of my leadership style is to be a constant nudge and ask, why not? You want to push the limits of the way people are thinking. What's holding us back? That helps open the aperture a bit of what we can collectively achieve.

**Q. What are some other tactical approaches that you use to help leaders get their teams to be more open to change and try new approaches?**

**A.** One of the expressions we often use is that for things to change, we must change. So, we always ask, what do I have to do differently on a personal level? What does the team have to do differently? I always start with, what am I doing differently today? What meetings am I going to? How am I spending my time? I am constantly out there in our different offices with our different teams and trying to understand what's holding us back and how our firm can give them the confidence and knowledge that we are going to support them and have their backs.

I also asked my team to start looking at how they're spending their time and how their teams are behaving. And then on a call, I asked each of them, okay, what did you do differently this week? And I am going to keep asking that question. It's about helping them realize that they have to be the change agents themselves.

**Q. You've been in this role about a year now. Is there anything about the reality of the role that is different from what you expected before you took over?**

**A.** There are a couple of things. First, giving people conviction of what the future will bring in a positive way is super important. I think we underestimate the impact of Covid on the collective psyche of people. We've all been through a lot. We have to help them believe in and recognize the specialness of the opportunity we have in front of us.

Second, I probably underestimated the importance and impact of publicly acknowledging mistakes we've made and being vulnerable about those mistakes while also sharing the lessons we learned from those experiences. Those create real connection points with people.

Finally, I've been surprised by how often people want me to weigh in on various issues and decisions that I don't think should involve me. I say no to a lot of meetings. You have to save that voice for the most important moments. I've had lots of debates with people who say they think that the company needs to hear from me more. But I think that's the wrong way for us to move forward.

**Q. You mentioned sports. What are some other early influences that shaped how you lead today?**

**A.** A lot of my orientation comes from my parents, who taught me the importance of hard work. That really shaped how I approached everything, including school and athletics. I was willing to put the real energy and real time into whatever I was doing, and I wouldn't take on anything unless I could do that.

I also played mostly team sports growing up. And the beauty of being on a team is that you can't win on your own. It doesn't matter how good you are. Baseball was probably the sport I was most competitive in for the longest stretch. What I learned is that if someone ever makes a mistake, we as a team have to own the mistake. In business, you have to take the time to build a great team. And the best teams are always strengthened in hard times. That's when you find out if people have each other's backs.

These lessons from my sports days have translated into how we lead as a firm. We get the team together every week for an hour and a half. We hold the meetings over Zoom because we are spread across the country. But the rules are that nobody should be on mute. We want to hear when people are frustrated, and we don't like people raising their hand to speak. We want to hear what's on their minds. We want people to interrupt each other. Somebody might think that the schedule is not a great use of time, but we've built way more trust, and we are faster now in making decisions.

**Q. How does leadership need to evolve in the age of AI?**

**A.** Every leader today has to have a vision for the way AI can transform their business. We have the ability right now to reimagine what our businesses can look like. So, when we speak today with CEOs, we ask them, “Do you have a vision for what your institution can look like if it were an AI-first organization five years from now? And what’s the journey to get there?” It’s still early innings, but there’s a unique opportunity right now for leaders to reimagine and transform their companies. That is a gift.

**Q. How do you hire? What questions do you typically ask job candidates in an interview?**

**A.** I do like to ask about failures—when and why did something not work out as they planned? Once they share that, I typically ask three more specific questions. What were they thinking? What did they say? And what did they do? The answers to those questions tell me a lot about how the individual handles difficult moments and how they influence other people.

Figuring out how people deal with others in those moments, and how they think about influencing others, is way more important than what they know. Most people I get to interview are probably intellectually capable of figuring out an answer. The question is, do they know how to bring an organization along?