



Your Job As A Leader Is Not To Be An Expert. It's To Be An Expert Learner.

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Rudi Kindts held numerous senior executive roles over his career, including as Group Human Resources Director at British American Tobacco. He is also a colleague of mine at [Merryck & Co.](#), a senior leadership development and executive mentoring firm. Kindts shared provocative insights on why leaders need to provide more meaning and inspiration to the people on their team, and how they have to redefine their role in this age of disruption.

Q. What patterns do you see with the executives you're advising?

A. One theme is resilience. There is a lot of pressure on executives, and it's increasing because of what's happening in the external world. They find themselves overwhelmed, not only because of the number of issues that they're dealing with on a daily basis, but also because of the time they put into their working life.

Globalization is also having an impact on managing different time zones. One client leads teams in the U.S., UK and Australia. That often means having four hours of meetings at night so everybody can be on the call. People can talk in theory about it being a matter of time management and priorities. But there's so much going on, it can be terribly difficult for them to prioritize. And with that often comes guilt, as well, because they're not spending

enough time with their teams, children and spouses.

Q. What else?

A. One of the things that is often missing in the way they are being led is meaning. I see people working on automatic pilot. There's no sufficient explanation of the meaning of what the work is and where it's leading. There's a lack of conversations, so it looks like leadership is more command and control.

Q. Why do you think that is?

A. I started corporate life in my first job in 1986, but leadership has not evolved much since then. There is not a lot of enlightenment at the top. People are still very short-term goal oriented and impulsive. Of course, there are exceptions, but I think there is a shortage of enlightened leadership to help enable and develop people and make them feel engaged and inspired.

Q. It is a tough combination – people feel overwhelmed because of the workload, plus their leaders are not giving them context and a sense of meaning.

A. I often hear people say that they feel they don't have a choice, or that they are coerced into certain things or they forced themselves into certain lifestyle. And so we have a lot of conversations around choice, which can be very liberating for people – to remind them they have choice across the whole spectrum, like whether to say yes or no to something, and even what they want to do with their life.

Q. A big pressure people face, in addition to the workload, is a sense of uncertainty. With so much disruption, there is no playbook to follow any more.

A. People do struggle with not knowing. With the digitalization of business, there's a lot going on, and if executives are really honest with themselves, they don't know. Some thrive in the not knowing. Others really have an issue with that because they define leadership as someone who knows everything better than anybody else.

Q. So what do you say to people?

A. The first thing I do is comfort them that they're not the only ones who feel that way. And then we talk about how they define leadership. If you define leadership as having all the answers, you're going to struggle. That leads to a conversation around being an expert or an expert learner, and the difference between those two. It's about having the capacity to navigate your way through different fields of knowledge, and to hold different viewpoints at the same time.

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you're going to struggle."*

I see executives sometimes being unable to make decisions because they're a victim of linear thinking. They have a question, but a lot of people have different views, which lead to more questions. What a lot of executives have learned to do is, for a moment, hold those different views in their head and decide from there, instead of the decision being seen as coming at the end of a linear process.

It also is important in that context to talk about the role of small experiments. Sometimes the answers aren't there, so instead of relying solely on analyzing something to death, you can do a pilot or little experiment.

Q. What are some of the tougher conversations you have with clients?

A. One is holding up a mirror to them about their leadership style and why it may not be working. One example is that the requests they are sometimes handing down to their teams are very much flawed because there's not enough context. I will tell my clients that they have to spend more time being clear because that will make everything more efficient.

But then they sometimes say, "Well, I assume they understand me. I pay them all that money to know what I'm talking about." That's where I see a lot of efficiency being lost these days. The requests are flawed, so people start second-guessing themselves, and then what comes back isn't right.

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second-guessing themselves."*

A defining moment in my career was when I was working for British American Tobacco in the UK, and the CEO at the time was Paul Adams. We were working on organizing ourselves to become more of a globally integrated company, and we were really struggling as an executive team. Then Paul interrupted an executive meeting and said, "Am I the only one who is out of his comfort zone here?"

That was fantastic because it made everybody feel like they were in the same boat together, and I use that as an important example. When the request can be clear, make it clear. But when you don't know and you're exploring, share with your people that you're exploring and that you don't know either. I don't see enough leaders doing either of those.

Q. And what were other big leadership lessons from your career?

A. A key one was about being in tune with what's happening emotionally with the people who work with you. We were going through another reorganization and my team was extremely tired because they had been leading most of those reorgs. One day, they came to me and asked whether, during a four-day meeting with the global team, they could spend one or two hours talking with me about how they felt, because they were tired and they had had enough. Initially my answer was no, because we had a very full agenda, and I couldn't afford one or two hours to talk about how we feel about those things.

Something must have happened with me overnight, and the next morning I got up and I thought, this is ridiculous. I offered to the team to have two hours to talk about how we feel about what's going on and how overwhelmed we were. There was going to be no problem-solving, no solutions after those two hours, but just talking about it. And it was amazing how the team galvanized and felt energized by that discussion.

At first, I was not in touch with my own feelings about what was going on, which made it almost impossible to understand what was happening with the people I work with. It was also about being vulnerable to work with their emotions and understand them.

Understanding them doesn't mean you have to agree with them. It's about having the courage to be vulnerable, and get into those themes even if you don't have a lot of training or insights into how to handle them.