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Leadership Moments: You're Chasing Goals, But Are You Enjoying the Work?

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During her 21-year career with PricewaterhouseCoopers, Deborah Bothun's roles included leading its global entertainment and media practice across 54 countries. She is now a colleague of mine at The ExCo Group, a senior leadership development and executive mentoring firm. In these "Leadership Moments" interviews, I'll be focusing on key lessons that executives learned during their careers and their best mentoring advice. Here's the conversation I had (edited for space) with Bothun. Follow me here on LinkedIn to see future interviews. And be sure to check out Bothun's own "Whole Self" interview series.

Q. What are some themes that come up most often in your mentoring work?

A. The issue I go back to most often in my conversations with clients is to remind them that the one thing that is more important than achieving all the short-, medium- and long-term goals they set is enjoying their work.

If you get up every day and think, "I'm going to get three things done today that are going to help me achieve my first quarter goals," that's great. But how much of that are you going to enjoy? If you're not enjoying the process more than 50 percent of the time, and the only

thing you enjoy is achieving the goal, then you're probably in the wrong job or the wrong company.

You need to constantly reassess that because life is long, careers are long, and if over half of the time it's just about checking those boxes for yourself or for somebody else, that's not where you should be.

Q. Other themes?

A. I often remind them that their destiny isn't predetermined. Their organization isn't static. Don't assume the job is fixed. The environment is changing so fast that if you're talented and you're adding a lot of value, there is no reason why you can't make what you want a reality.

If the organization isn't ready to make that change or you don't have the right decision-makers around you, then maybe it is time to make a change. But you shouldn't assume that you can't make a change in the organization that you're in, because often you can.

Q. And what's the best strategy for making that happen?

A. First, work on the things you need to develop to be the person that they don't want to lose, and to be the person that they consider so valuable that the organization is willing to listen to you, respect your vision and want to help you make the change because they believe in you. It has to start with the individual making some changes to be the best they can be.

Another one of my themes is that often people don't think of their role as having a P&L impact. Everybody's role ultimately has a P&L impact. No matter what functional area you're in, you need to be responsible for the commercialization of that organization.

Regardless of what you do, you need to understand how what you do drives revenue or drives cost. That way, you become more knowledgeable about the drivers in your area and how they intersect with the drivers of growth in other areas, and you become more integrated into the whole team. And if you can start to think that way, you're going to have a much better chance of moving in the direction you want.

Within the confines of the mentor relationship, I also ask people to allow themselves to dream within the context of work. I'll say, "When we're together, for part of our time let's assume that there are no resource constraints. Let's talk about your vision. What do you want to accomplish, if you did not have financial or human resource constraints? Let's lay out three scenarios."

Then I'll bring that back up at a follow-up session and ask, "What are the constraints that

don't allow this, how constraining are they, and how could this be done differently?" It's useful to take off those guardrails for a while, but then go away and then come back and say, "Okay, why can't we do this?"

Q. What's a tough conversation you've had to have with a client?

A. One was where the client thought of himself as a strong advocate for his people, a total people person who was always saying that he'd take a bullet for his team. The resounding feedback I heard from his colleagues was that his approach wasn't a good thing.

They wanted someone who could help them develop their career rather than be their best friend. They wanted somebody who could give them the hard news so they could learn and grow. They wanted to take responsibility for their analysis or decision that was wrong. By taking the bullet and by being everybody's buddy, he was developing an unsettled, unhappy workforce.

Q. What are some of the patterns you've seen about broader organizational challenges?

A. The world is changing so quickly around technology and people that it's very difficult for an executive to have the expertise to fully understand all the changes and how they impact their organization. What do you do about AI? How should you be thinking about blockchain? What do you do about the fact that you have an entire generation of middle managers who are struggling to do their jobs?

It's harder and harder to have a high-level point of view, to learn enough to know the right questions to ask, to make sure that you're incorporating all these ideas in your overall strategy. That's just going to get harder.

Q. So what should people do?

A. You have to narrow down your overarching strategy into two or three goals for the organization and then, given these specific overarching goals, ask how technology impacts them. Do I have the right people in those leadership positions who can show me how these new frameworks and methodologies and technologies will impact the strategy? You have to have a certain amount of knowledge yourself so you can feel comfortable that you've at least got the right people and you're asking the right questions.

The other thing is that it's clear that you have to have a younger generation of people in all kinds of roles. You have to recognize that somebody who is 26 years old may know more than somebody who is in their 40s for certain types of jobs. At a minimum, you have to have those people as your advisors in the organization.

Q. What were your biggest leadership lessons personally?

A. I was born in a small town of 2,000 people in southwestern Minnesota. One of my grandmothers was a tiny woman, and she was asthmatic. But she ran the house and the farm by influence, and she was a role model – she did whatever it took to get it done. I watched how she was the strength and the backbone of that family.

Q. And lessons during your professional career?

A. I got some important feedback in my 40s that was constructive, but also took me back a bit. It was about my expectation that everyone should have the same sort of passion and drive that I did. People thought that they couldn't meet my standards, and so they weren't sure if they even wanted to work with me. The views on me were polarized. Some people didn't want to work with anybody but me, and others thought I was just too much.

I was at PwC then, and when I would visit the New York office, I would schedule all these meetings and have a list of everything I needed to accomplish with each person. A friend of mine at the company told me that just once he would like to have a casual conversation with me, without a checklist.

That stuck with me, and for the next several months, I didn't schedule any of those meetings. I tried to find more natural environments for the discussions. I cut back my checklist, and focused more on asking people how they were doing and figuring out how I could help them.

Life is a journey, and I am constantly seeking feedback to learn and grow.