



Art of Leading

Powerful insights from top leaders.



Antonio Carrillo

Work Is A Marathon, And Everyone Needs To Find Ways To Decompress



Adam Bryant [in](#)

Senior Managing Director at The ExCo Group; Author, "The CEO Test"

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***Antonio Carrillo**, the CEO of Arcosa, a provider of infrastructure-related products and solutions, shared his key leadership insights in my latest "Art of Leading" interview. [Subscribe here](#) to receive future interviews.*

Q: Leadership became much tougher these last few years. How did you adjust your approach?

A: There's been so much uncertainty, and I find that people really appreciated a few things the most. The first is to always try to do the right thing. You might make mistakes. That's okay, as long as you're trying to do the right thing.

Second, you have to be honest about what you're doing and why you're trying to do it. People are adults, and they deserve to know the honest truth of what's happening. The

third piece is flexibility. We will learn new things and we might change course.

Q: How do you keep your finger on the pulse of what employees are thinking?

A: We have about 125 plants, and I visit them frequently to do town halls. We also conduct employee surveys. But my favorite way to stay in touch with them is to hold monthly virtual coffees with ten employees who are chosen randomly. There's no one from HR on the call, and their bosses are not there.

I tell them anything they want to know about the company, and then I tell them, "Here, you're the teacher and I'm the student. Tell me what we need to be doing better." The feedback is incredible, and it includes some good things and some bad things, which is okay because that's what I'm looking for.

One example of something I learned came when I was working for Mexichem. We had implemented a new safety system at our plant in Mexico, but a woman on the call asked me, "Are you really interested in our safety?" I said, "Absolutely."

Then she told me that our company was buying inexpensive cars for our sales force that didn't have airbags. I would have never known that unless she had told me, and we changed the policy. When you act on the feedback, word gets around and people become more willing to speak up.

Q: What were key influences that really shaped who you are as a leader today?

A: My father was a chemical engineer, and I wanted to study to be a mechanical engineer. And for whatever reason, my father believed that anybody who was not a chemical engineer was not an engineer, and he wouldn't help pay for college for me.

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So I had to work to pay for college. A friend's father gave me a job in his factory, and I moved up to supervisor and then

plant manager before going for my MBA. In that role, you're like the meat in the middle of a sandwich between the workers and management. You become the translator of what's happening.

That was one of the best experiences of my life. Today, I still feel most at home when I'm in a plant. I also learned that plants are like emotional animals. If the emotions are good, everything will go well. When emotions go bad, things go bad really fast.

Q: When you first became a CEO, was there an aspect of the job that you hadn't quite appreciated beforehand?

A: Ninety percent of people who come in my office bring bad news. You have to solve a lot of problems, and you have to have a lot of fortitude. You have to convey a sense that everything is going to be okay — we may have a big issue we need to deal with, but we're going to get through it okay. So let's not panic or overreact.

Q: How do you hire?

A: I want analytical people who take a data-driven approach to problem-solving. That way, if people bring me a problem, then it's not about solving it with opinions or perception. So I test for analytical skills by asking them how they would go about solving certain kinds of problems, and what data they would look for.

I also look for people who are self-aware. When I ask people about their biggest weakness, 99 percent of the time they give me predictable answers like, "I work too hard." So I really probe, and I tell them I'm honestly looking to understand their weaknesses. I find that the people who are the most disruptive are not self-aware.

Q: When you give senior executives on your team some coaching, what are the themes that typically come up?

A: Work is a marathon. It's not a sprint. And people need to realize that, behave like that, and keep things in perspective. You can't do everything at once. And you have to learn to take time off and how to decompress. And that's on you. You have to learn how to do that for yourself.

I also make another point about self-awareness. When people are under stress, they retreat to their comfort zone—their safe place—whatever that is for them. So it may be their area of expertise, or certain behaviors. We all have that. In my case, I will visit a plant. For a finance executive, it might be focusing on accounting.

That might be okay, but that also might not be the right answer for moment, because the right answer might be to engage on a topic or challenge that isn't part of your comfort zone. You have to face it whether you're comfortable or not.

You're going to be faced with so many new challenges, and if you're not self-aware, you will keep going back to your safe place to figure out how to deal with them. Again, that's okay if it's the right approach, but it might not be.

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