Duncan Angove, CEO of Blue Yonder

You Have To Build A Framework And A Culture Where Work Is Decentralized

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Duncan Angove, CEO of Blue Yonder, shared his key leadership insights in my latest "Art of Leading" interview. Subscribe here to receive future interviews.

Q. What's your core framework for leadership?

A. The first thing you learn early in your career is that you have to surround yourself with people who can complement you by doing things that you don't naturally gravitate to. You can't be the smartest person in the room. That doesn't mean you don't need to be in the details and action-oriented. But it just makes your life so much better when you work with people who are better than you in certain areas.

I've also learned that the whole notion of command-and-control, with a single CEO who can orchestrate every aspect of a company, is unrealistic, particularly in this environment where work is more distributed. You have to build a framework and a culture where work is decentralized. Then you can drive empowerment without sacrificing accountability and efficiency and all the good things that come from centralization.

Q. How do you push down decision-making and empowerment while making sure everybody's still aligned and there's accountability? That's a tricky balancing act.

A. One way is by being more focused on effective meetings. They can be run so much better in terms of preparation, including who you're inviting to them and the agenda. You send out the materials 48 hours in advance, and make sure the topics on the agenda are phrased as questions. Then you document the takeaways afterward and share them with as many people as possible just to keep everyone coordinated.

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It's important to write things down. People get so consumed with the design of slides rather than actually articulating their thoughts in words. It's one of the things that makes me a bit worried about ChatGPT. People have lost the art of narrative and storytelling.

The second thing is that you must have really strong processes and infrastructure in place. We've created something called the BYOS—the Blue Yonder Operating System—which is a set of methodologies and processes around how we do things, including how we communicate, and how we make decisions. It's about eliminating bureaucracy rather than adding to it.

Q. Can you share an example of what's included in the BYOS?

A. One is hiring. Most people, when they see a one-hour

interview with a candidate on their calendar that day, they kind of groan. They don't see it as part of their day job, particularly if they're not the hiring manager. They're doing it for someone else, and they just want to tick the box and move on.

Instead, people should be thinking like we're a 20-person startup, and we only have $1 million left, and we're adding one more person. So that person we hire needs to be an absolute rockstar to help move the company forward. We're a people business. We don't have big capital expenditures. So it's arguably the single most important thing we do.

Q. How do you personally hire?

A. First, I look for IQ. It's nice to sit in a room and feel like you're surrounded by super intelligent people. The second is that people have to be detailed-oriented. It doesn't matter what level you get to. Particularly when you're trying to hire a senior-level executive and you've got people who are in the second stage of their career, you want to know if they still have the ability, appetite, intellect, and drive to go super-deep to solve a problem.

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So I'll ask questions to tease that out, like asking about a difficult customer problem that was escalated in the last year. What happened, and did they then go beyond that to figure out the root cause? There's nothing worse than when everything gets escalated to the CEO. You want people who will take stuff off your plate, not add to it.

Q. What were early influences that really shaped who you are as a leader today?

A. I grew up all around the world. My dad was in the Royal Air Force, so I left England when I was six months old and we lived all over the world, including the Far East and the Middle East, before going back to England for university when I was 18. This was in the '60s and '70s, so there weren't shows or video games like there are today, and you had to use your imagination. If I have a superpower, it's my imagination, and

that's probably how I developed it. It's the ability to see what other people can't see.

Secondly, because there was really nothing else to do when you were growing up, I got into computers really early. Combined with my imagination, I became really good at problem solving, and being able to see where software was going.

Q. What was a key leadership lesson you learned early on?

A. In '97, I joined a company called Retek, and it was a rocket ship. We took it public in '99 at the height of irrational exuberance. I learned a lot about the lessons of hypergrowth, including that everything breaks. Back then, software companies were way over their skis in terms of what they could really deliver, and there was a lot of vaporware. So I learned the importance of making sure you have people who can help deliver what you're promising to customers. A lot of companies went by the wayside because they couldn't do that.

Q. What are the most common themes that come up when you are mentoring executives?

A. One is their people. There's often not enough focus on developing their own team and succession planning—who's ready today, and who are the next two people who are going to be ready in two to three years? How do you get them ready? It's about investing in their people. You want people who are the very best at what they do in that role in the industry.

The second piece is around making sure that people do what they say they are going to do. You need to hold your people accountable.

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