



Phil Gallagher

"You Always Have To Be Focusing On Areas Where You Can Add Value"



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Phil Gallagher, CEO of Avnet, shared his key leadership insights in my latest "Art of Leading" interview. [Subscribe here](#) to receive future interviews.

Q. What's your playbook for leadership?

A. My framework is listening and learning, asking questions and wanting honest feedback, and building trust and relationships right out of the gate. The last thing you want to

do as a new leader or manager is to come in and start making decisions and acting like a know-it-all. People can spot that right away, you'll lose trust, and you're more likely to make bad decisions. So I always start with asking a lot of questions about the key constituents—our employees, suppliers and customers.

I need to know more about what's not going well than what is going well. I have a saying that people should walk in with good news and run in with bad news. Don't be afraid to bubble up issues. Every company has problems. We're going to make mistakes, but we need to identify them quickly so we can fix them.

Q. This is your first CEO role. Was the reality of the job different, even in a small way, from what you expected?

A. I was a senior executive in the company before. I was dealing with the board, and I was on earnings calls. But there's a big difference when you are number one. No matter what happens in the company, you are ultimately responsible. That's the biggest change.

Then there is the challenge of balancing time and prioritization. You get pulled in a lot of different directions, and you always have to ask, is that really the best use of my time? You always have to be focusing on areas where you can add value.

Q. How do you hire? What do you look for when you are interviewing someone who might be a direct report to you?

A. For the most part, what I really interview for is adaptability and culture. I spend a lot of time on emotional intelligence. Where I see leaders maximize success or failure is around the soft stuff—humility, relationships, teamwork, attitude, and collaboration.

I'll ask a lot of questions around jobs they've done in the past. Where have they maximized for success? Where have they failed? What type of boss do they really like? What is their approach to leadership?

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One of the toughest things for senior leaders is dealing with ambiguity. The higher up you go, the more grey things become. You're going to make some mistakes, but if you wait for all the facts to line up exactly, you're not going to make a decision on anything. So I want to understand what kind of risk they are willing to take.

Q. When you mentor senior leaders, what are the themes that come up most often?

A. A big one is self-awareness. You've got to be aware of how you are reacting to and talking to others. The higher you go, you've got to be careful that you're not coming across as demeaning in any way, even if it's unintentional. People are listening closely to you, and you've got to be careful.

Q. What were important early influences for you?

A. We didn't have a lot growing up, but the family was important as a foundation. My mom and dad both worked in law enforcement. I learned early on that I can't stand bullies. I got kicked out of school once in sixth grade because I got in a fight with a bully who was picking on a friend of mine, and when I went home my mom thanked me. I like underdogs.

I played a lot of sports when I was young. I had a great coach in both high school and college, but the high school coach in particular was a big influence. He taught us to stay humble. We had a really good football team. A lot of teams go out before the game and make all kinds of noise. He'd always talk us down to the press before the game, and we would be pretty quiet doing calisthenics to warm up for the games. His point was that there was no reason to brag ahead of time. He was all about discipline and hard work.

I also got a lucky break early on. I was in college, and had a job lined up, but the company reneged on the offer. I was running out of money, but then a gentleman I knew, who heard about my situation, got me an interview at Hamilton Avnet in 1982.

I still don't know to this day why he took that much interest

in me, because he didn't really know me that well, but he did. I've always tried to do the right thing and keep a good attitude. The lesson for me, and that I pass along to others who are starting out, is that somebody is watching you all the time. Just remember that.

Q. What other career advice do you give people?

A. I got this tip from an 85-year-old executive who was the father of a friend of my son. I asked him, "What would be one tip you'd give my son?" He said, "Be kind." The higher up we go, the more we need to remember that. Be kind. We're up here because, hopefully, we're nice and treated people right. Don't get to this spot and treat people differently. It's just not right.

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