



**Pam Fields**

Former CEO of Stetson Worldwide, Inc.

# Pam Fields' Leadership Lessons

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In this series, we explore some of the most important lessons and insights from our executive coaches and mentors. The ExCo Group executive coach and mentor Pam Fields, former CEO of Stetson Worldwide, shares her lessons on the importance of explaining the “why,” encouraging a culture of constructive disagreement and having the strength to ask for help.

### KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

I learned an important lesson early in my career when I was promoted for the first time into a management role. I had no prior experience or training in leading and managing. I did what I thought was best. I told people what to do. I knew where I wanted to go, and I knew why I wanted to go there. And I made the biggest mistake because I just told people, “Do this.”

The two women who reported to me—they were seasoned professionals—invited me to lunch one day, and I was excited. I thought this was a sign we were really getting along, but they ultimately laid me out. They told me that while they thought I was pretty smart and had good ideas, I hadn't told them why I wanted to do anything. They felt that I didn't value them, and they didn't want to work for me. I remember everything about that day, a lesson I've never forgotten. You must tell people why, especially if you're a quick thinker. You have to explain the steps and the context. You just can't assume people are going to get there on their own.

Another key leadership lesson seems obvious; teams perform best when they are unified. Unity is tested when you encourage the team to take risks and, as a leader, you need to make the team feel safe in doing so. You have to have a culture of constructive disagreement and signal that taking risks means that some things will fail. In order to do that, you need a manager who's going to stand up and take the bullet and say, "We failed. It's my team, therefore it's my fault." It's something that is just intrinsic to who I am as a human being. I have always put myself in front of the bullet. I have always fostered constructive disagreement. I don't want to have blind spots. I don't want to walk into a meeting with customers or board members and be blindsided. It's much less painful to take the bullet with information than to take the bullet by surprise.

## **WHEN I COACH CLIENTS, WE OFTEN TALK ABOUT...**

If people are struggling in their roles or not operating at peak efficiency, one reason I often see is that they're not asking for help. They think that part of the job description is to put on their Superman cape and always have the right answer. It's precisely the wrong instinct. The more complicated the questions you deal with, the more you need to reach out to others. Another word for help is partnership, and when you reframe it that way, people seem to understand that they have an opportunity to expand their network of smart thinkers and get more perspectives on how to get something done and move it forward. Asking for help is not a weakness. It is, in fact, a strength. And there are downstream benefits of asking for help. If your team sees you do it, they will do it with their colleagues and peers and bounce things off of one another. It creates a much healthier culture.

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A second big theme often is the danger of neglecting your stakeholder network. That network must be nurtured and grown because it can pay big dividends. And I'm talking about both internal and external stakeholders. They are the people who can help you get where you want to go from a career perspective. They can help you develop expertise that you don't have. They can provide brain food for you to expand and sharpen your thinking. Nurturing a stakeholder network will help you get your team promoted and noticed, which will build your reputation as a talent developer.

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Many people are uncomfortable developing their network because they think networking has negative connotations. They might think that if they just do great work, people are going to notice. But unless you have a personal PR service touting your accomplishments within a big company, the odds are that you're not going to get noticed. You want to ensure people know you are doing a great job and build those connections. It has to be done, but people sometimes say, "Pam, I don't have time for this." And I tell them, "No, you don't have time not to do this." It can be a phone call. It can be a text or email. There are a million different ways to reach out. Not every stakeholder requires the same level of touch, but everyone who can help you achieve your goals needs an ongoing touch. So be clear on who your stakeholders are and what's important to them. What can you bring to them? How can you help them? What do you want from them? You always want to be the person who has something to give back. You have to do it with a clarity of purpose and a strategy.