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Former CEO, Teridion; Chairman, Liquid Instruments; Director, Semtech

Saar Gillai's Leadership Lessons | ExCo Insights

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In this series, we explore insights from our executive coaches and mentors. Saar Gillai, an executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group and former CEO of Teridion, Chairman of Liquid Instruments, and Director at Semtech, shares his valuable lessons. These include the value of hard conversations, the importance of direct communication, and other leadership insights.

KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

A lesson I learned early in my career was that being able to have hard conversations as a leader is a superpower. It's not that you're necessarily better at it or that you're more comfortable than others having those conversations. The point is that you're willing to have them.

I learned this in one of my first roles as a manager in a technology company. I took over a team after they had taken most of the strong people from that group and put them on a new project. So I was now in charge of a bunch of people who management saw as bad hires, and they didn't really know what to do with them. I had one star employee, but there were about 20 others who couldn't program to save their lives. I gave them assignments to figure out what they could do, and I also went to HR to figure out the probation process. Within six months, I personally had terminated at least ten people. There were several who turned to be fine—they just needed more direction—and we were able to make the team a lot more effective.

Everybody thought that what I did with that team was magical. But it wasn't magical. I just had to work through it and figure out who was a good fit for their role, and who wasn't, and be willing to have difficult 1:1 conversations with each of them to set the right expectations. That's happened to me throughout my career. Everybody knows what needs to be done, but if it's uncomfortable, nobody really wants to deal with it. And so I learned that being willing to have those difficult conversations is a superpower that sets you apart. You shouldn't surprise people, of course. You have to be clear and fair about what you want them to do so that you can measure their performance against that goal and avoid any ambiguity. If results fall short, you don't want any confusion about who was accountable for what.



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Another leadership lesson stems from the fact that I am a relatively strong personality. But I came to appreciate the power of the team through a management course I took. The professor gave us a complex project that we had to work through, and they gave us two ways to go about it. One was to do it by ourselves, and the second was to do with a team. I assumed that I was going to get the best score doing it on my own. And then when we did it with the team, I told myself to hang back and not dominate the conversation. The result was that we did better as a team than what I did on my own.

That really highlighted for me how everyone has something to contribute, and that different points of view are powerful. I'm still a strong personality, but I've told the teams I've worked with, "I'm going to be right about 80 percent of the time, but the problem is that I don't know when I'm going to be wrong the other 20 percent of the time, so I'm open to you challenging me on anything you want."

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

People need to be more direct and clear. Maybe it's because they want to avoid conflict, but there tends to be not enough directness and too much ambiguity in those conversations with peers, direct reports or bosses. The higher up you go, the more you see it, and it's often because people are navigating a political environment.

So I encourage people to first unpack what they really think. In a perfect world, without any issues, threats or power dynamics, what would you want to say to the other person? And if that's what they want to say, why aren't they saying it? And what's the best way to communicate that message so that the other person doesn't feel like they're being backed into a corner? You have to provide context, and understand and acknowledge the other person's perspective. But you can't be ambiguous, because then nothing will happen. People need to be direct in a constructive way so that they get the outcome they're after.

Another common theme that comes up is delegation. The people we typically work with are high performers who have moved up in part by their ability to solve a crisis or do a turnaround. Usually the way you do that is by managing things very closely and mastering the details. But then after they fix things, they need to step back a bit and create some structure so that others can do the work.

That can be a difficult transition for some people, and they struggle to figure out the right level of detail to engage on. They have to create the mental model for getting the work done without them doing it all, because micromanagement is not a sustainable model, particularly because talented workers don't want to be micromanaged. The best people like independence.

The answer is to have direct conversations where you set clear expectations to give people a road-map for how they can become more independent, and then take a trust-but-verify approach. I'm not against managing things very tightly at any given moment, because there are times where this is required. But it's not a long-term scalable solution for developing your team.