



Deborah Lee James

Former Secretary of the Air Force,
United States Department of Defense

Deborah Lee James' Leadership Lessons | ExCo Insights

June 17, 2024

In this series, we explore some of the most important lessons and insights from our executive coaches and mentors. Deborah Lee James, The ExCo Group executive coach and mentor and former Secretary of the Air Force of the United States Department of Defense, shares her lessons, emphasizing the significance of the all-important plan B, the power of being a superior communicator, and nurturing relationships to find win-wins.

KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

Number one, without question, is that it's always important to have a Plan A but be prepared to pivot to that all-important Plan B. That's agility—the ability to change course and be open to new ideas. You may need to do this because Plan A doesn't work out, or there may be a better opportunity in Plan B that Plan A lacks.

I learned that lesson early on in my life. When I was young, my Plan A for my career was to be a diplomat. I took all the right courses in school. I learned a foreign language. I had relevant internships. And when I got out of graduate school and applied to the foreign service to be a diplomat, I thought, who in the world could have better credentials as a 22-year-old than me? I felt very well-prepared, but the State Department didn't pick me for whatever reason.

After going through a period of great depression—I literally stayed in bed for a week and cried—I realized I needed a Plan B. I first needed a job and had to do something with my life. So, I started applying elsewhere. I did want to be in the Federal government, so I applied to different government agencies. After receiving rejection after rejection, I finally got a yes from the Department of the Army. I threw myself into those early jobs. I worked with a great team and a great first boss who was a mentor to me. One job led to the next, and 35 years later, I became Secretary of the Air Force and the second woman ever to lead a military service in the United States. And it all started with the necessity to pivot to a Plan B.

My second big leadership lesson was the importance of being a superior communicator. There are at least three aspects to communicating well. The first is effective oral communication. People who can communicate orally can take a very complex issue and reduce it to something understandable to everyone, along with providing a broader context and rationale. It's very important to explain how the work your team is doing fits into the overall strategy. And you have to be frank and authentic.

Second, you have to be able to write in a concise and persuasive manner. And the third aspect of being a strong communicator is the one that gets overlooked the most—being an active listener. At least 50 percent of communicating is really listening to what the other person is saying. Often people jump ahead to thinking about what they want to say next, and then they are not fully listening, which means they are missing out on an opportunity to learn.

“

A key step is identifying the crucial relationships you need to nurture to be effective, both for yourself and the broader enterprise.

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

The first theme that comes up often is navigating difficult relationships with peers, particularly in a matrixed environment where not everybody you work with is a direct report. In such cultures, competing interests are frequent, so you have to learn how to navigate those relationships and persuade and influence people. Because some people are transparent and easy to work with, while others can have hidden agendas.

A key step is identifying the crucial relationships you need to nurture to be effective, both for yourself and the broader enterprise. And then you need to diagnose what the other person wants as

well as what you need, and then try to find a way to compromise or help each other by looking for a win-win. So invest in those relationships. You may come up against a difficult colleague, but try to get to know the person at a deeper level by asking about their family and their personal life. You need to role model the behaviors you expect from the other person.

Another big theme that I come across quite often in dealing with very seasoned and accomplished people is that they need to realize that the skills that got them to where they are today are not the same skills that will get them to the next level tomorrow. As they move into higher leadership roles, they need to learn not to dive as deeply into the details and instead focus much more on longer-term strategy. Where are we going in the next five years? What's our next move on the chessboard? What are my competitors doing? How can some new technologies help me or hurt me? How can we move faster? These are the areas where you need to focus your attention, time, and effort rather than the operational excellence or technical expertise that got you to where you are today.