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# Kim Lubel's Leadership Lessons | ExCo Insights

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In this series, we explore some of the most important lessons and insights from our executive coaches and mentors.

Kim Lubel, an executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group and former Chairman and CEO of CST Brands, shares her leadership lessons. These include acting quickly with underperformers, accepting that not everyone will like you, and recognizing the tough decisions central to leadership.

## KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

One lesson I learned the hard way was that the sooner you address performance issues, the better. You can never move too quickly on those issues. I learned that lesson the hard way the first time I became the boss of some colleagues who had been my peers. I hesitated to address a performance issue and learned that ignoring it never works. I had a direct report who wasn't particularly strong, but had a long tenure with the company and had lasted through several different regime changes. Moreover, this employee appeared to think that my job should have been given to him. The employee was bitter and created a negative environment that impacted everybody else on the team.

I finally sat him down and said, “This isn’t working.” I think he was shocked. But once he left, you could feel the relief from the rest of the team because they were having to pick up his work and deal with his attitude. Once I addressed the issue, it made everything so much better.

I came across a similar situation when I moved into the CEO role. One of my direct reports was very talented and had been with the company for a long time. But he had learned a command-and-control management style that wouldn’t work in the culture we were trying to create. I would talk to him and lay out expectations. It felt as though he would acknowledge our discussions and then go back and do the same things. It took me almost a year to sit him down and tell him this wasn’t working. The company and I needed his skillset and deep experience, but the cost had become too high.

## **The sooner you address performance issues, the better.**

I gave him two choices—to either retire or start working with a leadership coach to get on board with what I was trying to do at the company. To his credit, he did the heavy, intensive coaching work and managed to turn around his entire approach within a short period of time. He became a key leader at the company and, even better, a lifelong friend. In each case, the lesson for me was the same: you have to deal with performance issues quickly.

A second key lesson for me starts with the fact that I’m a middle child, and I’m also from Ohio, so I’m “Midwest nice.” It took me a long time to realize that there will be people in organizations who just don’t like you. Initially, when I moved into leadership roles, I spent a lot of time trying to get that last person to like me. But it was a wasted effort because, in the law of large numbers, you’re inevitably going to have somebody who just isn’t going to get on the team. You want to ensure you’re not spending all your time on that one person versus the broader team.

Being a leader means making decisions. You need to listen to others and take in all the information, but ultimately, you have to make the decisions, and not everyone will like your decisions. It took me a long time to realize that it was okay that I wouldn’t be everyone’s favorite person.

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

I serve on several public company boards, and I find that the people I mentor see boards as a mysterious black box. So, I spend time explaining how directors work together and how they receive and process information. I also encourage my clients to study the backgrounds of each director to give them an idea of the kinds of questions they should ask them if they are seated next to them at dinner.

You have to remember that boards meet maybe once every three months, and they are likely to forget key themes between those meetings. So repetition helps to bring them back up to speed each quarter. I tell my clients to think about the key messages that they want the board to remember and then repeat them at every meeting.

The second theme that comes up a lot builds on that last point about communication. You simply can't communicate enough—with employees, the board, and other stakeholders. You need to make sure that the communication is simple and consistent.

When I was CEO, we acquired a network of convenience stores with a great reputation in its community. The founder, who was also the CEO, had a strong and clear communication plan for his employees based on four rules: Be nice, have fun, sell stuff, and be the best.

When we acquired the company, we immediately adopted those four rules for the entire organization because they addressed everything our stakeholders wanted and needed. I loved the simplicity of it, and we used that framework in all our meetings. So, I work on the same thing with the people I coach. What are the three or four themes you want to ensure you cover every time you communicate?