



# In The Talent Field, We Are Always Reinventing How We Help Leaders Be Their Best

September 12, 2024

***Ted Nouryan, VP of Talent Acquisition, Organizational Development, and HR Operations at PPL Corporation, discusses his leadership imperatives, strategies for breaking down organizational silos, and the importance of passion, discipline, and emotional intelligence in effective leadership in this interview with The ExCo Group's CEO, David Reimer, and Senior Managing Director and Partner, Adam Bryant.***

***This interview is part of our X-Factor Leadership series featuring conversations with heads of talent and learning at leading corporations.***

**Reimer:** What are the X-factors that separate the best leaders today?

**Nouryan:** Intellectual horsepower is the price of admission. Beyond that, in this dynamic, changing environment, you need to have a “player” mindset to know how to solve issues and have the right lens to fix something. You need a level of passion to show people you’re all in and how excited you are about the journey.

And you need humility. You can’t think you are the only one who can make things happen and move the ball forward. So, you need to listen to your people, get to know them, and understand them. People want to know that you care about them, and they’ll give you the discretionary effort if you make them feel like you care about their lives beyond what they do every day at work.

**Bryant:** Can you discuss what you mean by a player mindset?

**Nouryan:** A player is the opposite of somebody who sees themselves as a victim. With a victim mindset, everything's happening to you. You couldn't get something done because of external factors. But a player is somebody who, no matter what hand they've been dealt, will do everything they can in their power to accomplish something.

**Reimer:** How did you get into the leadership space in the first place?

**Nouryan:** Two events sparked my interest in leadership. One was a class in college called Industrial Organizational Psychology. I would be a business major, but I decided this field was even more interesting because it combines business and psychology.

The other was a great CEO from early in my career. I studied his style and approach very carefully, mainly how he could show his passion for innovation, inspire people, and energize them around a vision. I wondered, how do we build more leaders who can inspire and engage while also showing their humility? How do we show them that these skills can be learned?

It's not all going to come naturally to people. Not everybody has high emotional intelligence. Not everybody can inspire people with their passion. But you can figure out ways around that or try to get better at those things. In this field, we continually reinvent how we help others be their best.

**Bryant:** What's the most valuable leadership lesson you learned from your worst manager?

**Nouryan:** It was about the importance of relationship-building across the enterprise. I had a leader who didn't understand how crucial those relationships are to helping you achieve your goals. Instead, I watched the boss argue with people about what to do and what not to do.

That boss completely burned every bridge that they went across. I was hired under this person to help them because I was a relationship-builder. I could rebuild and repair those bridges by listening to people, connecting with them, responding to their needs, and helping them accomplish good work.

**Reimer:** When you coach and mentor senior executives, what themes come up most often?

**Nouryan:** Very high-level executives sometimes forget that each person has different needs, motivating factors, and perspectives. They don't want to get too close to people, and so they create barriers by not trying to understand them. I've been in situations where a very senior leader wanted to fire somebody without trying to understand their vector, their lens, and not allowing them to succeed by empowering them. Instead, they need to connect with people and understand what they are passionate about. If you don't do that, you lose their engagement and their discretionary effort.

Another theme is reminding people to clearly define their line of accountability so they do not spend too much time in the proverbial engine room. Executives love to dive seven layers deep, but their job is to make three or four really good decisions a year for their company. They shouldn't worry about how much money is spent on something like the seating in the lobby.

**Bryant:** How do you hire? What questions do you ask?

**Nouryan:** I love to ask people, "Walk me through the steps of..." So, when somebody says, for example, that they led the transformation of their company, I will then probe into what that meant in

practice. “Can you walk me through the steps of what that was like? Tell me about that.”

I want to know their capability and responsibility—what they were there to do and what they did. Were they leading the transformation, or were they leading the communication around the transformation? Were they rolling up their sleeves or not? Were they building the team and building the strategy? Did they devise the transformation plan, or did they execute someone else’s plan?

You can take that approach with anything. If someone says they are a Six Sigma black belt, I’ll ask them what that entails and what they had to learn. I will dive deep to feel a level of comfort that these people know what they are talking about and whether they understand the nuances of their work.

**Reimer:** Are there longstanding ideas in business or in the leadership field that you feel are, in effect, past their expiration date and need to be rethought or reframed for this new era?

**Nouryan:** We need to move away from traditional hierarchies. Businesses must understand how to operate like one company, even with many different operating units. We need to flatten that hierarchy and operate across different boundaries and trajectories. I don’t care about your level or your title. I care about whether you can help us accomplish our collective goal.

Anybody in this company should be able to pick up the phone and call anybody else who is an expert on a particular subject rather than going up and down the chain of command to get permission to have a conversation. We must be able to operate across boundaries and locations in a different way.

**Bryant:** What career and life advice do you give new college graduates?

**Nouryan:** You can be highly successful if you’re chasing something you love and are passionate about and working hard at it. It’s about discipline—that’s the X-factor behind the success of great leaders and professional athletes. If you want to do something, you can do it. If you have drive, passion, discipline, and emotional intelligence, you will get there.