



Brian O'Malley

Former CEO & president of Domino Foods, Inc.,
Board member of The Sugar Association

Embracing Change | Brian O'Malley's 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.

Brian O'Malley, an executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group, former CEO and president of Domino Foods, Inc., and board member of The Sugar Association, shares his leadership lessons. He emphasizes the importance of having an open door, setting clear and measurable goals, and embracing change.

KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

One lesson is the importance of having an open door. Early in my career, we had a big problem in the organization, which could have been avoided had people come forward and shared what they were seeing. But they didn't, and as a result, the company ended up in a protracted legal dispute with the government. We eventually worked it out, but we went through a lot of pain and hardship because people didn't know that they could come forward and talk to their boss or move things up the management chain.

So, one thing I always did as I moved into management roles was to listen carefully and make sure that people knew they could come to me with problems so we could nip them in the bud. I also learned that once you open the door, you have to follow through. You can't just listen and do nothing because they may not tell you other things in the future. Maybe it's not as big a problem as they thought, but you can't ignore what they share.

A second lesson was about the importance of setting very clear goals. I worked for a public company early on, where we placed a big premium on budgeting processes with clear and measurable goals. After a couple of leveraged buyouts, we were bought by a company that didn't really understand our business. They didn't really value planning—in fact, they discouraged it as unnecessary. But then, over time, I watched the company almost go out of business.

After that, I always kept sight of the importance of setting clear and measurable goals. They had to be achievable, and there was usually a mix of some stretch goals and others that were slam dunks. The more you can measure something, the more you can reassess and refine it.

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

The biggest issue that comes up is change management. Change is inevitable and relatively constant. Companies grow, and the environment around them is constantly changing. So, I tell the people I'm mentoring that you must embrace change. You can't resist it. You can manage it, but you can't walk away from it. And with change, there are going to be two possible outcomes—things are going to improve, or they're going to deteriorate. And if you resist change, you guarantee that things will deteriorate. So you always have to be thinking, how do you take advantage of change? Don't ignore it or run away from it. Embrace it.

Another big theme is the challenge of managing upward. If someone has a new boss, that always creates some uncertainty and the chance that the new boss will be a bad boss. I've personally had many difficult bosses. I tell people in that situation that just because the boss is difficult doesn't mean they don't have your back or don't want you to succeed because their success is tied to yours.

So, I always advise people in that situation to understand where their boss is coming from. What's going on in their world? What challenges are they facing? Then, understand that this person is probably just trying to improve you. Their criticisms or challenges are not necessarily to impede your progress but to help you succeed.

Of course, there will be some situations where you simply may be stuck with a really bad boss. But in most instances, it's just them trying to get you to do certain things because of their style, which can sometimes come across as a little bit difficult. So, I advise people not to overreact and try to take suggestions or criticisms constructively. And try to build a rapport with them. You don't want to be in a situation where you're afraid to talk to that person. You have to be able to meet them where they are, and over time they'll see that.