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# Chris Lee'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. Chris Lee, an executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group, Senior Partner of FAA Investments, and Board Member of Matthews Asia Funds, shares his leadership lessons. He emphasizes the nuances of corporate cultures, the importance of humor in building relationships, and understanding why people follow you.

### KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

One key lesson was the importance of understanding the nuances of corporate cultures, including the differences among a company's divisions and regional operations. I saw this while working within the investment banking division of a large global bank, which had a more transactional culture with clients than my colleagues in the private banking division, which had a more relationship-driven culture.

Then, I became divisional head of the Asia Pacific region of a major international bank, with about 16 countries under my management. I did have one instance where a colleague was advising me to act in ways that were insensitive to regional differences. One example was the red-envelope practice (locally known as Lai See in Cantonese or Hong Bao in Mandarin) in mainland China and many other countries in Asia. Every new year, as a manager, you're supposed to give your subordinates a red envelope with money inside.

From a strictly legal point of view, the American general counsel and chief compliance officer said this was an absolute non-starter. But from a cultural point of view, it is a practice that has been around for about 4,000 years. Yes, we were an international company, but to not be sensitive to those practices is like a Japanese automaker coming to the United States and saying, well, we don't eat turkey during our Thanksgiving, so we should not be giving away turkeys to our staff.

Another key lesson—which I learned from Dan Glickman, the former U.S. Agriculture Secretary—was to appreciate how you can use humor to build better relationships with colleagues with different styles, needs, and wants. There will always be leadership situations—for example, when teams discuss budgets, investments, and risks—where people disagree. These are serious topics, but when you can inject a bit of humor into the discussion from time to time, it just takes the tension away and leads to healthier discussions.

I'm a serious person, and it's easy for me to spend a lot of time in meetings going deep on the numbers. So when I notice that my non-finance colleagues are getting a bit tired of listening to me present

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numbers, I try to slow down and maybe crack a joke and say something self-deprecating to make them feel a bit more comfortable. When I did that, I found I could engage people better and hold their attention longer.

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

One theme that comes up often is the importance of understanding why people follow you. One reason people have followership is that your subordinates share your values. Another reason is that people think they can gain more power by being on your team. The third reason is that they think they can earn more money if they are on your team.

I often use this framework with clients so that they are very clear on the motivations of their followers. Of course, the strongest and longest-lasting relationships are those based on shared values. I've always enjoyed those relationships more with my teams, and I feel that I'm a better leader and coach for them that way.

The second theme is transformation. Many clients are going through the transformation from being managers to leaders. They may have strong skills in a particular area, but to manage their team effectively, they really need to elevate themselves to a leadership role. That's not a straightforward exercise. It's a journey, and people must think about why they want to do that.

Another example of transformation is moving from executive to board director. As an executive, you make decisions and then direct people to execute them. As a board member, your role is to provide guidance, advice, and oversight, but not to second-guess.

These kinds of transformations require self-awareness and knowing what you don't know. Part of that is going to come from coaching and having that other voice to push you and help shorten those periods of transformation. If you do it by yourself, it will take longer. That's why I enjoy being part of this journey with my clients; we can help them transform faster.