

A portrait of Kerry Whorton Cooper, a woman with long, wavy brown hair, smiling warmly. She is wearing a dark top and a necklace with green beads. The background is black.

Kerry Whorton Cooper

Board Chair at Pacific Gas & Electric Company;
Former President & COO at Rothy's

Kerry Whorton Cooper'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.

Kerry Whorton Cooper, an executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group, board chair at Pacific Gas and Electric Company, and former president and COO at Rothy's, shares her leadership lessons. These lessons emphasize the importance of avoiding getting good at tasks you don't enjoy, cultivating a culture that encourages dissent, and learning to pick your battles.

KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

Don't get good at something you don't enjoy. I learned that early in my career. I was 27, and working 100-hour weeks at a startup, doing financial planning. I had to build all these spreadsheets, and I was working so hard that I got carpal tunnel syndrome. Then the CFO gave me that really smart advice about being careful to not become good at something you don't enjoy.

As I moved into leadership roles, that helped me think about finding those things that are energizing to you and avoiding the things that are draining. And how do you build a team around you that can do

those things? I think about diversity in all forms, including surrounding yourself with people who love to do the stuff that you don't love to do, and vice versa. It was an offhanded comment from CFO all those years ago, but sometimes you pick up on those little things more than grand reveals of advice that people share.

The second lesson was around the importance of asking questions as you move into leadership roles. When you're an individual contributor role, you can be much more directive. And in many ways, that's what the expectation is—that you have the answer. But when I was promoted to a VP position at Levi's, someone did something that I asked them to do that was really dumb. And I asked that person, "Why didn't you tell me that was really dumb?" She said, "Well, you asked me to do it."

So I learned about the power of position, and how you have to be careful about asking for things. You have to create an environment where people feel free to push back on you, and part of that is asking questions instead of just giving direction. I tell people now that one of the key things about working

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with me is the obligation to dissent, which I learned in my years at McKinsey. It's very easy, in a hierarchical environment, to just listen to what the boss says without feeling that you have the freedom or the obligation to dissent.

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

This links back to the first leadership lesson I mentioned, but one common theme is about the importance of building the team around you and beneath you to scale yourself into your next role. Often the executives we are coaching have aspirations to reach the C-suite or become the CEO. Part of that is learning how you grow into bigger roles and delegate to your team. You have to empower them so that everyone can grow. If you don't give things away, you're disabling the team. You're keeping them from learning and having that opportunity.

And you can't let yourself become stagnant and let momentum just carry you along. That's a big part of scaling. You have to figure out those places where you need to make a change and who you need to help enable that change so you can really make your mark. At a C-level job, the expectation is that you're going to drive, change, and continue to build. What does that look like? How do you get there?

Often it's hard because you're taking existing processes, tools and people and making the change that the business needs. That goes against human nature, which often means just letting things continue in the same way you've always been doing things. The bigger push should be, how do we want to fundamentally change the business and what's my role in doing that? What are the priorities, and how do you sequence them? You have to pick your battles because you're not going to change everything at once. You need to be thoughtful and focused on what really matters and make sure your team understands that, too.