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Rajesh Padmanabhan'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.

Rajesh Padmanabhan, an executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group, CEO of Talavvy Business Catalysts, and former CHRO of Capgemini, shares his leadership lessons— emphasizing the impact of HR on business and customers, how to navigate other cultures, and the importance of building a SWOT [Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats] analysis.

KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

A key lesson for me was about the importance of taking the end-customer process into the HR function. For the first 16 years of my career, I was in line functions. I was a corporate banker and a business leader. I was in consulting, too. They were entirely customer-facing roles. I knew all about P&Ls. So when I moved into HR, my lens was wanting to understand the impact of HR on the business and our customers. With every process or practice, I used to ask, is this adding value for the customer? Do we understand the impact that's being created? After all, we shouldn't be restricting ourselves to only think about the world of internal customers. I saw that as an opportunity to leverage things differently.

The broader leadership lesson here is, when you are doing work that is largely qualitative, like HR, you should always endeavor to put in place quantifiable measures to help drive effectiveness and efficiencies in ways that show up for your customers. You can't just say that customer-centricity is a value for the organization without a measure of it. You must be able to show that in ways that customers notice and feel the impact. And you must make sure those values are being manifested by your leaders.

“Work hard to understand the culture and context you're working in. Otherwise, your judgments may be imbalanced.”

Another important lesson for me came when I started working in other countries. In the first 15 years of my career, I worked only in India. I was not exposed to other cultures. When I got the first opportunity to take on a global role, I didn't think I had the skills to navigate other cultures. I learned it the hard way, by making mistakes and by being curious. You learn about the nuances of different cultures. For example, in China, people don't necessarily look directly at someone who is their superior. It's not about lack of confidence. It's just part of the culture of not making too much direct eye contact with seniors. You must work hard to understand the culture and context you're working in. Otherwise, your judgments may be imbalanced.

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

A big theme is feeling that their career is stagnating, but they don't know what steps to take. There are usually a few common dynamics at play. One is that they feel like it's a bad fit for them with the culture of their organization. It's not necessarily anyone's fault; it's just that the chemistry is not there. Another theme is a mismatch between their expectations for their career and what their supervisors think. That can cause a lot of stress and anxiety.

The third one is when they recognize that their skill set is not what it should be for the role they want. In that situation, how do they reskill themselves? What is their Version 2.0? In those conversations, I help people think through their purpose for the next phase of their career. That can require some deep discovery, including reflecting on their achievements over their career so far. I help them build a SWOT [Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats] analysis about themselves. That helps clarify any skills gap they need to close. And we also work on their personal rebranding—their profile in the professional world. In this age of AI, you have to be very mindful about the impact of search engine optimization and how it can affect your chances of being considered for certain roles.

The other big theme is mental health. That is often assumed to be more of an issue with employees at lower levels in the organization. There can be a lot of hesitancy among leaders to share that mental health is also a challenge for them. But I have a lot of conversations with clients in which they are very vulnerable about their challenges. It takes time for them to make confessions and seek direction and help. That tells me there is a bigger black box at the leadership level that needs to be acknowledged more openly and addressed.