



Brad Thomas' 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.

Brad Thomas, executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group, former Executive Vice President, five-time CHRO, and Advisory Board Member at The Kernel, shares key leadership lessons, including why CEOs build a culture, the risks of tolerating misaligned leaders, and the critical role of investing in leadership development.

CAN YOU DESCRIBE TWO IMPORTANT LEADERSHIP LESSONS YOU LEARNED AND HOW YOU CAME TO LEARN THEM?

One observation relates to the power of a great organization. Intentionally or not, CEOs build a culture. They either design what “they need” or just manage what “they inherit.” The Navy Seals are the Navy Seals, and the Post Office is the Post Office for a reason. Leaving it to chance is the path to consistently average results.

It takes a big commitment to create a high-performing company. The most valued CHROs make this a cornerstone of their contribution. They lead the development of the plan and keep the team aligned

with objectives. Most companies update their strategic plan annually, but only a few even address the effort it takes to make the organization the destination for the best talent.

This was an early lesson I learned in the Marines. During Officer Candidate School, we rotated into leadership positions every week. At one point, I was put in a platoon commander role. During an inspection, a drill sergeant found a dirty canteen cup on one of my Marines. I paid a heavy price for that mistake.

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That night, the Captain called me into his office and explained that the issue was much bigger than the canteen cup. “I want you to understand the bigger picture here,” he said. Everything we do in the Marine Corps is designed to reinforce superior performance. There can be terrible consequences if we get this wrong. As a leader, you’re accountable for ensuring we meet that standard. That was a powerful lesson about being entrusted with such a tradition.

Another important lesson involved the consequences of tolerating the wrong type of leader. They can damage the culture and hurt performance. Sacrificing for short-term results can be costly in the long run. I saw that first-hand during an assignment in financial services. A division leader exceeded revenue targets, but feedback from overseas staff indicated some shady practices.

We took those concerns to the CEO but were directed to ignore them because the numbers looked so good. Months later, big compliance issues surfaced, and our reputation and performance suffered for several years. It was a painful but important lesson.

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

Successfully transitioning to senior leadership demands new skills and perspective. Executives often struggle with new success factors for operating at the enterprise level. We work on new skills and accelerate their ability to add value.

Additionally, when collecting feedback as part of the coaching process, direct reports to senior executives consistently tell me that they want greater candor and direct feedback. They have a perception that executives are not investing enough in developing them for bigger opportunities. They don’t take the time or lack the skills to have productive conversations. Ambitious, hard-working junior executives want more accelerated development and growth opportunities. Senior executives can improve company results with a greater focus on leadership development.