



If You Give Someone An Opportunity To Step Up, You Have To Give Them Space To Learn

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David Fields, CEO of Navitus Health Solutions, shares his leadership insights with Adam Bryant in this Art of Leading conversation. Fields discusses the humility required for effective leadership, the importance of giving people space to learn from mistakes, and how his upbringing in poverty shaped his commitment to his team's success.

Q. What is core to your leadership style?

A. I do listen carefully, and I will change my mind when presented with strong facts. A lot of this is rooted in the humility of leadership. I believe leadership is a privilege, not a right. You have to keep earning the right to lead people. If you don't, they'll either vote with their feet and leave, or they will vote with their productivity and not be very productive.

There's a lot of ego in being a CEO that, to me, is misplaced, and it usually shows up by people thinking that they are always right. Humility is far more important. I have learned over the years that I try to be right more than 50 percent of the time. You cannot be wedded to your mistakes. If you set the team down a path that is ultimately not going to work, you've got to reverse course and get out of it very quickly.

Another big thing for me is identifying talent, promoting them, and giving them lots of opportunity. And you have to be patient, because sometimes people make mistakes, and a single mistake should not

define a person's career. There's always a second opportunity with me. But if it happens the second and third time, we're probably going to do something about it.

Q. That last point feels like it runs counter to what feels like a growing pressure—in a lot of aspects of life, not just business—to perform right out of the gate. It's as if there's no allowance for a learning curve anymore. How did giving people time to learn become important to you?

A. Working at Humana earlier in my career was a pivotal moment. The company was willing to give people a chance at leadership before they had perfected the skills. They took many chances on me and gave me a lot of opportunity.

They would tolerate you making a mistake, because they knew that you were learning. So I've tried to learn from that and to create space for people. If you give someone an opportunity to step up, you also have to give them space to learn.

Q. That's a lesson you learned from great bosses. What is a lesson you've learned from difficult bosses over the years?

A. I have discovered working for some first-time CEOs over the years that they often believe that the world can be changed overnight, and they will set an agenda that is virtually impossible to deliver on without killing those around them. I grew wary of working with first-time CEOs if I was going to be the number two, because it's almost as if you have to train them about the art of the possible.

Q. And what about when you were a first-time CEO?

A. The reason it's so easy for me to call out today is because I was that person. We were going to take over the world. I worked seven days a week. But at some point, you have to stop and look around and see what kind of damage you are creating.

I sat down with my team one day and said, "We need to talk, because I can sense you all are completely worn out, and some of you are not happy. Give me honest feedback about what I should change."

One of the nicest ladies I had ever worked with, and a wonderful leader of her team, said, "Whenever I come to your office, it's like going to the bear's den, and I don't know if I'm going to be eaten alive or if I'm going to get the nice bear that day."

It was a seminal moment in leadership for me, because I wondered, how could I do this to her? I had to wake up, become much more observant, and figure out how to lead a team rather than just driving people hard.

I saw the human toll, and now I try to be much more mindful. We still set very aggressive agendas. But if you want to win people's hearts in addition to their minds, you need to act like a human being who understands what they're going through.

Q. What questions do you ask when you are interviewing senior leaders for a job?

A. One is, how do you engender followership? What's it like to work for you and to be on your team? I like to hear about concrete examples of how they engender the followership to accomplish

remarkable things. The other question I ask is about failure and what they learned from it.

I also ask about thought leadership. I want to understand what they did creatively to break out of the mold and to advance in their career. And where did that come from? And I will keep probing to understand what they were truly responsible for—did they come up with the idea, or were they the ones who helped implement it?

Q. What were early influences that shaped who you are today?

A. Poverty played a key role. My father was a Baptist minister. He was the most principled person I've ever known. He truly lived his principles, and his principles were deeply rooted in the Bible. He cared nothing about worldly things. He only cared about your relationship with God, and whether you were going to make it to heaven. He had also been a Marine Raider in World War II.

So I grew up with a deeply moral and ethical background. But we also grew up in eastern Kentucky, and we qualified for Medicaid. My father got paid once a month, and sometimes the money and food would run out near the end of the month. There were four children, and I'll never forget my mother sometimes taking food off her plate and sharing it with us. Growing up in that environment provided me with a very strong work ethic.

So it became really important for me to be able to provide for my family. And the success of people who work with me is very important to me. As long as they're performing, I like to see them do very well financially. I want them to be able to take care of their families, to fund college educations, and do whatever they need to do.