Empathy And Self-Awareness Are The Two Most Critical Qualities Of Effective Leaders

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Phil Rudolph, former Executive Vice President of Jack in the Box Inc., and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shares insights with Adam Bryant on three key themes: the power of vulnerability in building trust with clients, why empathy and self-awareness are two sides of the same coin for effective leadership, and the importance of taking smart risks and building resilience through early career failures.

Q. What do you see as the X factors of effective coaching and mentoring?

A. For me, it's about being genuine, being empathetic and, most important, being vulnerable. Our clients have to trust us and they have to believe in us; the process won't work if they think we're just vendors or if they think we're just mailing it in.

I'm very transparent. I am who I am, and I open up and share stories about my own challenges and missteps, and leadership lessons I had to learn. I try to be as genuine and as honest and as vulnerable as I can be, because that's how I feel one can build trust.

Q. I find empathy is one of those words that can sometimes mean different things to different people. How do you think about it?

A. I have a strong point of view that the two most critical characteristics of an effective leader are

empathy and self-awareness. Think of them as two sides of the same coin. The empathy side is making the effort to understand and learn what is driving the person you're working with or engaging with. What impacts them? What resonates with them? How do they process things? What are their weaknesses and strengths?

It's about using your instincts and radar to understand what drives the other person—what they care about and what's fundamentally critical to them and their personal and professional success.

Self-awareness is the ability to face that empathy mirror toward yourself; it's understanding yourself in the same way that empathy enables you to understand others. You can't be a good leader unless you understand what you're good at and what you're bad at, and how to surround yourself with people who can fill the gaps and complement your own weaknesses, strengths, and skills.

Q. Is there a tool or framework that you use that you generally find leads to the biggest unlocks?

A. I really like the User Manual exercise that we use here at ExCo, where we ask people to share what others should know about them, including their preferences and work styles. I learn two important things from that exercise.

First, I'll get a peek into what the person identifies as the issues that they'd like their colleagues and stakeholders to understand about them. But second, I learn a lot by how they approach the exercise. Is it an inside-out exercise where the leader strives to tell their stakeholders everything the leader thinks is important about themselves? Or is it more of an outside-in exercise where the leader wants to help their stakeholders learn how to maximize their own effectiveness in working with the leader?

That distinction gets at their focus. Is it more about wanting others to accommodate and adjust to the leader's working style? Or is the leader focused on trying to maximize the success of their partnership? It's really a multi-dimensional tool for me. It gives me a perspective on what the leader's superpowers are, and where they might have opportunities to grow.

Q. Was there a particularly challenging conversation you had with a client that ultimately led to a good outcome?

A. I worked with one client who was really talented and capable, and was in a role one level below the C-suite. Over the years, he had developed this persona of being sort of the lovable curmudgeon—sometimes more lovable and sometimes more curmudgeon.

As he was getting more responsibility within the company, he would constantly tell me that it was a real labor for him because, while he liked the people he was working with, he didn't like change, and every time he got a new leader, he would have to break them in. He told me that his gruff style made it tough for new people to warm to him, but altering that style – as others do with new leaders – was in his view akin to Kabuki theater, and it repelled him.

I responded, "Isn't what you're doing simply another form of Kabuki theater? You've created a persona that, by your own admission, is designed to push people away. But that's not who you are. It's an act." It was a breakthrough moment. He spent a lot of time processing it and realized that he was not being entirely honest with himself.

Q. What advice do you often find yourself sharing with clients?

A. It’s important for people to understand that they are not going to get everything right. If you’re afraid of making a mistake, you’re not going to be effective. You’ve got to take smart risks. You’ve got to be comfortable with the possibility that you’re going to fail from time to time.

And if you don’t fail when you’re working your way up the ladder, you’re going to fail when you’re higher up, and that’s a worst place to learn from mistakes, because the stakes are higher.

If you don’t go through that experience, you don’t build those calluses. It’s important for the people we work with to understand that taking smart risks in the right context can result in a bad outcome, but it’s rarely going to result in your being shown the door.