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Blind Spot? Most Senior Executives Don't Focus Enough on Peer Networks

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Kerry Hatch has held numerous senior executive roles at companies that include American Express and Starwood Hotels & Resorts. She is now a colleague of mine at The ExCo Group, a senior leadership development and executive mentoring firm. In these "Leadership Moments" interviews, I'll be focusing on key lessons that executives learned and their best mentoring advice. Here's the conversation I had with Hatch, who shared smart insights on the importance of engaging your peers at work — relationships that many people overlook at their peril.

Q. What are some common themes that come up when you're advising senior executives?

A. As they move up in their career, peers become super-important. If they want to get to the top of the pyramid, their peers have to be their cheerleaders and want to work for them one day. It's usually a muscle they haven't spent as much time exercising compared to managing up and down.

Q: What else?

A. Helping them figure out what they want out of their career. They've all been heads down, climbing the ladder, and if you ask them what they ultimately want to do, they'll typically tell you that they want to be a CEO. But when you unpack that a little bit, and get them to talk about their "energy enhancers" and "energy zappers," some of them decide they don't want to be a CEO.

"You can go really far in your career and be cordial with your peers but not really engage with them."

We also talk about developing gravitas. As they've moved up, they're not the one solving all the problems anymore. They're influencing others, and they have to be excited for them to be successful.

Q. Can people develop gravitas?

A. I think most things are teachable, and gravitas is definitely teachable. It's about taking things that are unconscious and making them conscious. Gravitas can show up in many different ways, but part of it is knowing when to listen and when to speak, knowing when to add value, knowing that you don't have to be the smartest person in the room and to let others contribute.

Q. Talk a bit more about the importance of engaging your peers. That's a point that a lot of people miss.

A. You can go really far in your career and be cordial with your peers but not really engage with them. But the more successful you are, the more you'll tend to breed a little resentment. The pyramid narrows at the top, so naturally it's going to get more and more competitive. And if you have a lot of high-potential people who like to win, they're probably not going to be your fan if you don't engage them.

It would be great if everybody who didn't know you just treated you with a sense of, "Oh, I don't know them yet, so let me get to know them and form an opinion." But it's just not human nature. People will evaluate you based on their own belief system. And if you don't spend the time getting to know somebody, you interpret their actions through your own lens. And if you're different than them -- and it could be gender, ethnicity or anything else -- there's a very high likelihood that you're going to misinterpret them and their actions.

One of the things I advise people to do is to set up a regular meeting with your peers. They will often say in response, "Why? If they need me, they call me." And I'll point out that it's not just a matter of them needing you. They want to know that you like them, that you care

about them and they can trust you. You don't want to wait until you're in a crisis to develop a rapport. You have to understand that your peers may not help you, but they can certainly hurt you. It's just the nature of the beast.

Q. I imagine a lot of people say, "But I don't have time to do that."

A. I encourage people to set up a half-hour meeting every other week with the four people they don't talk to on a regular basis. It doesn't have to be with an agenda. Just make sure you talk to them on a regular basis and never cancel a meeting. If they want to cancel a meeting, that's okay because you get the credit for setting up the meeting in the first place. It's amazing what that can do for relationships.

"If your peers say they don't like you, all of a sudden you can get ejected."

When you go into a new company, the importance of your peers goes way up. They can sabotage you upon arrival, which is why so many executives fail when they go into new companies. Even though your manager may tell you to behave a certain way, you have to navigate your own path. If your peers say they don't like you, all of a sudden you can get ejected, and the boss doesn't stand by you because the group took over. I've seen this happen to so many executives.

Q. What do you see as the leader's role to find, develop, or shuffle their talent?

A. We have a lot of discussions about people on their teams, and whether they're up to the job. I was always tough on talent. If the person's not right for the job, I'm going to fix it. People should feel good about themselves when they go home at night, and our job is to get them to the right ball field where they can succeed.

If they're not a major league baseball player, send them down to the minors and let them be a rock star there. But somebody who's in the majors never asks to go to the minors, so sometimes as leaders we need to help them find that right spot. Now, that usually comes after trying to help the person develop, but at some point, you have to act.

Q. What has been a key leadership lesson for you?

A. Over my career, I've often been the person who is sent in to fix a problem. In my 23 years at AMEX, I never had a job, except my last one, that lasted more than 20 months, and I worked in seven different divisions.

One of my assignments was particularly challenging because I had two very seasoned

executives who wanted and expected to get the job that they gave me. It was a tricky situation. I couldn't move them out right away. They didn't really want to work for me, and they weren't helpful in terms of telling me about the business, which was new to me.

I did something I'd never done before. I created a team of high-performers from across the division who were two levels down from me. They were the direct reports of my direct reports, and I asked them to help us transform the business. They were invited to come to any team meeting they wanted to. I was able to figure out what made each of those people tick, and then I could get the best out of them and they could work with me directly. I managed to pull together the right team of people, inspired them to do amazing work and got out of their way. That's really what leadership is about.