



Leading Through Disruption

Powerful conversations with prominent leaders on navigating this era of relentless change

As A Leader, You Have To Build Trust And Be Clear About Your Own Values

Published on October 4, 2022



Matthias Compes



Dr. Anastassia Lauterbach

Managing Director EMEA The ExCo Leadership Group, NED, Professor for AI, Public Speaker and Writer, Leadership Coach

Matthias Compes, a veteran business leader, shared key leadership lessons with me and my colleague Adam Bryant, managing director of The ExCo Group, in our latest "Leading Through Disruption" interview. Subscribe [here](#) to receive future interviews.

Lauterbach: How has leadership evolved during all the disruption of the last few years?

Compes: So many things have changed, but the challenges for leaders to some extent are still the same. It starts with yourself. You have to be clear about your own values, your own behavior, and you need to have a certain awareness for the needs and the problems of other people.

The biggest point I make when we talk about leadership is that direct reports need to trust us as a leader. We have a great responsibility in leading them. They trust us with their development, and to build a future for them. It's not just that they work for us and we pay them money. You want to not only have an impact by how you develop people, but you also want to be able to influence their life to some extent.

Bryant: With all the mentoring and coaching you've done over the years, what are the areas that you find senior executives struggle with most?

Compes: Many people have a hard time making decisions, particularly about their own lives. Another big problem is managing the pressure, because they definitely put a lot of pressure on themselves.

Lauterbach: What are the key leadership lessons you've learned?

Compes: My father was a manager, and I learned a lot by watching him, as well as many of the other bosses I had in my career — you study what they do well and what they do not do so well. About 25 years ago, when I did my first leadership training as I was moving into my first regional C-suite position, I started to think a lot about my values. It sounds so simple, but I started to treat people like I wanted to be treated.

To some extent, leadership is not that difficult when we start to listen to people and show interest in them. People want to be taken seriously. They need time from us. We have to listen to them. We have to be empathetic. Ten years ago, the main role of a leader was to be the decision-maker. Today, you need different communication skills and a lot of empathy.

*Today, you need different
communication skills and a lot
of empathy.*

About 15 years ago I had a direct report who shared with me a simple insight. She said about someone on my team, “He supports you by

doing a good job and you are responsible for his career.” That was the moment I realized that I have a responsibility for the hopes and careers of people. As long as you show them that you care and that you feel responsible for them and are interested in them, you get so much back from them.

Bryant: Can you talk more about how leadership is different today?

Compes: The communication skills that are needed today are different. We have to explain much better our decisions and the direction we want to go as a team and as an organization. If you are in a C-suite position today with some visibility in the public, you need these communication skills to explain to your company and your external stakeholders about where you are going as a company and why. Purpose is part of it, but I think that is sometimes stressed a bit too much.

Lauterbach: What has been the hardest part of leadership for you?

Compes: The hardest part was the responsibility to the blue-collar workers at the companies where I was a leader, and who really depended on their job. They were not like many senior executives, who can easily find a different job and make money somewhere else. Sometimes I was in conflict with my personal values when we fought with blue-collar workers over small raises in their pay. Meanwhile, we were dealing with private-equity owners who were making huge investments in our company.

It's really about values. I never found it difficult to be on stage or to speak to people. I was convincing as long as I personally believed in the message, and as long as I liked to go to the office in the morning. I felt a responsibility about people's livelihoods. But at the same time, you sometimes also have to make difficult decisions about terminating someone. Again, this is about responsibility, because we take away the chance of people to do something new in their life.

Bryant: What characteristics would you be looking for in hiring a new CEO?

Compes: They have to be able to balance different stakeholders, and that balance is not easy. There are demands from investors and the board, but there are also the stakeholders you are dealing with on the local level. That balancing act is sometimes frustrating for leaders, and you need to be able to manage that potential frustration. This is extremely important in senior positions. You need resilience.

[Subscribe here](#) to get future "Leading Through Disruption" interviews.