



Deanna Oppenheimer

Former CEO & Vice Chair of Global Retail
Banking at Barclays Retail Banking PLC

Deanna Oppenheimer's Leadership Lessons | ExCo Insights

June 30, 2025

In this series, we explore some of the most important lessons and insights from our executive coaches and mentors.

Deanna Oppenheimer, executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group and the former CEO & Vice Chair of Global Retail Banking at Barclays Retail Banking PLC, shares her key leadership lessons, including the importance of talent, the trial-by-fire experience, and the benefit of distance when dealing with people issues.

KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

The first one is the importance of talent. Early in my banking career, I had one person reporting to me, but at the height of my career, I had 60,000 people reporting to me. A key lesson for me along the way was about the importance of making tough decisions around talent, including with people you've worked with a long time and maybe you like them a lot. But you have to be able to make the tough decisions as the company grows and as its needs evolve.

I did have a rough experience with this early on. I was much younger than a particular woman who reported to me, and she had a lot of very visible ties to the community. I brought her into my office

and said, “This is just not working anymore. We’re changing the role.” A colleague in HR had warned me beforehand that she was not going to take it well, but I thought it was going to be fine. But the HR person said she was going to wait outside the door just in case. And of course, the woman reacted badly. She stood up and said that I had no authority to fire her.

There was some blowback from the community, and my boss called me and said, “Are you sure that was the right decision? Are you sure we did everything we could?” I said, “Yes, it was the right decision, and we need to stand by it now.” That was a good trial-by-fire experience. The broader point is that talent will make or break your business, and that means helping to grow the best performers and being able to part ways with people who are not going to help you get to where you need to go. And if you do have to fire someone, make sure that you treat them with the utmost respect and dignity, and make sure you have those conversations face-to-face.

“The broader point is that talent will make or break your business.”

The second key leadership lesson is about the timing of decisions you have to make, and it’s a particularly important skill as you move up in your career. Sometimes you want people to make decisions quickly, and you can feel like they are slowing down that process. But they are often doing it for reasons that you might not understand.

This was driven home for me at one point in my career when I was in marketing, and I was recommending that we adopt a new tech system. I was impatient, telling people that we should just do it now because we could get a great deal from a particular vendor. And then the senior manager said to me, “That deal is going to be there every quarter until we find the right time for us to make this decision.” And it was true. You don’t want to be pressured into a particular decision because you need to be thoughtful. The flip side of that is you can also take too long. It’s a balancing act, and there’s never an easy answer. You have to develop a sixth sense for what is right.

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

One of the most common themes is around people issues, including how to get along better with peers, a boss, or a board. It’s rarely about people on their team, because they’ve usually handpicked their direct reports. As just one example, consider someone who is a peer and particularly challenging. What often happens is that there is some dynamic with that person that causes you to shut down and get frustrated.

When I coach people who are dealing with that kind of situation, I tell them to take a minute after they’ve walked out of a meeting and quickly write down what the other person did and how they responded. Then reflect on it the next day, which helps people realize, with the benefit of some distance, that maybe they could have handled it differently. Starting to identify the trigger points is really crucial. Another approach is to focus on similarities rather than differences in those difficult conversations. Where are you aligned, rather than apart? How can you be helpful to each other?

The second common theme is the challenge of work-life balance. And this is particularly tough for people in the sandwich generation, and they may be taking care of either small children or elderly parents or both. And this often happens when people are in their thirties and early forties, just as their careers are really taking off.

I learned this trick from an executive earlier in our careers. We were sitting at an event for a bunch of kids, including his kids and mine. And I said, "How do you balance all this?" He said, "I set my calendar a year in advance, and I build in my family time with as much emphasis as I do my work commitments." I said, "Wow, that's impressive in and of itself."

I have two kids, and both my husband and I worked full time. Did we make it to every soccer game and horse-riding competition? No. But when we were there, we were very present. And that does make a difference.