



**Christine Elliott**

Former CEO of the Institute for Turnaround;  
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# Christine Elliott's Leadership Lessons | ExCo Insights

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

**Christine Elliott, executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group, former CEO of the Institute for Turnaround, and Chair of the Health and Care Professions Council**, shares her key leadership lessons, including the importance of embracing opportunity and pushing beyond your boundaries.

## KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

An important lesson for me is about embracing opportunity with urgency and purpose. I've come to the view that there is only one way to confront the inevitability of the finite nature of human life, and that is to live the most magnificent life that you can. And that includes being willing to dare to do something that pushes you beyond your boundaries.

The current great opportunity on our doorstep is AI. It is a leadership issue, not a tech issue — ignore it and risk obsolescence. I first heard about AI when an early career opportunity came along for me. At the time, I was doing some volunteer work for an organization that was in a pretty dire state.

The organization was unknown at the time, but it's since become world famous—Bletchley Park was where the world's first semi-programmable computer was invented. But nobody knew about it. It was being run by a handful of volunteers.

I went there for a random reason, toured the site, and was absolutely blown away by the story. I asked myself, why didn't I know about this, and why don't more people know about it?

It was in a terrible, rundown state and had failed to get funding numerous times. I started doing some volunteering work there in my spare time, and before long, three trustees approached me and said, "Look, Christine, we think you have the vision to drive this place forward, and to take us where we need to go." That was a turning point in my life. We had to work through many challenges, and it tested every sinew that I had. I spent almost nine years there, and by the time I left, it was in a very different and much more positive state.

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Another important lesson is that leaders infuse culture, and culture is the strongest driver of high performance. I've seen all kinds of leadership, including the damaging effects of a toxic leader who creates an environment where everyone is expected to agree with them. Those cultures are desperately unhealthy, and I've seen them burn and crash on more than one occasion.

I always try to avoid causing collateral damage when I lead. Even though sometimes tough decisions have to be taken about resourcing or the changing nature of the workforce, that is absolutely not a license to disregard the basic needs, rights, and sensitivities of the people who work in organizations. And if you get it right, they will help you achieve your goals while also knowing that you're going to support them. I am passionate about fairness in organizations because it's so crucial to building trust.

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

One common topic is the art of delegation. How do you actually get other people to do things, and preferably do them better than you might have done them? I won't pretend that I was particularly good at it early in my career, because I like the sense of achievement. Like most people who get into director and chief executive positions, there is a strong element of control in those roles. So you have to somehow walk people along the path of understanding that it is braver and more difficult to let go than it is to hold on, and that you will achieve much better results by letting go.

But you just don't let go willy-nilly. That's not what's being talked about here. There needs to be structure, process, and governance wrapped around it. That's been particularly relevant for me moving from executive roles to non-executive roles as a board director and mentor. I have adored being a board chair, but I find it way more difficult than being a chief executive, because there is a comfort factor in being able to do it, know it all, and be everywhere. It's much trickier when you are stepping back and the only way to make something happen is by persuading and influencing.

Another common theme in my mentoring discussions is the proverbial work-life balance. How do people get that right? What's a realistic idea of work-life balance? And if you look at broader demographic trends around the globe, the idea of a retirement date for a lot of people just isn't realistic. But, more importantly, what happens to people when they hit that threshold? Do they switch off?

My view is that sometimes work is integral to achieving that balance and that the boundaries of work are permeable. What some people see as work, others see as part of their identity. This is who they are, and this is what they want to be doing. That conversation is different for everybody.

I was not great at this earlier in my life because I was the proverbial workaholic. I worked through many nights, and I rarely took holidays. But the more mature you get, the more you realize that you are setting a poor example for other people if you can't switch off and feel like you have to keep proving your worth by being at your desk or making sure that you're logged in. What's been an important development for me is that I have had the good fortune to be chair of a wellbeing business, and I use what I've learned to inform my discussions with other people. There are always going to be times when it's all hands on deck, but otherwise, you have to give people the space to do what works for them.