



Ken Freeman's Leadership Lessons

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

Ken Freeman, executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group, former CEO and Chairman of Quest Diagnostics Incorporated, and former partner at KKR, shares his key leadership lessons, including the importance of differentiating arrogance and confidence, empathy as an essential trait for success, and avoiding the pitfalls of wanting to be liked.

KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

One key lesson is that arrogance kills. Henry Kravis, one of the founders of KKR, has a framed picture in his office with those two words—arrogance kills. And as we know, arrogance in business can destroy value. It can kill businesses, relationships, and reputations. There's a fine line, of course, between arrogance and confidence. Arrogance is about being full of yourself, whereas confidence is about being full of information and knowledge. Sometimes, when we push our confidence too far, it can come off as arrogance in the eyes of others. I've learned over the years that no one likes a know-it-all.

The difference between arrogance and confidence became very clear to me during my first performance review, when I was 23 years old and working at Corning Glass. I worked in the financial control function of the television glass business as an entry-level analyst alongside several other recent college graduates. My boss, Rich Russell, was the division controller. He also happened to be a former Marine who had fought during the Vietnam War. I assumed he was rough and tough, the kind of leader who ate nails for breakfast. So I strived to behave in ways that I thought he would want to see in me as an employee, and I couldn't have been more wrong.

“Leaders must use two hands: the hard hand of tough decisions, and the soft hand of dignity and fairness. That interplay of using both hands as leaders is what matters most.”

Rich had a one-word performance review for me. I was thinking it might be “outstanding,” “exceptional,” or “excellent.” I was wrong. He said, “Ken, do you know the meaning of empathy?” I fumbled around and said something along the lines of empathy is caring for others. Then he said, “Empathy is essential for success, and you don't have it. Your colleagues and I know that you're smart, you're capable, and you're very hardworking. But they don't enjoy working with you. If you want to have a successful career, you simply have to stop running over people, pounding your chest with the right answers ahead of everybody else, and being so outwardly competitive. Treat your colleagues with respect, exercise humility, and you can make something of your career.” I listened carefully, and ever since I have strived to treat my colleagues with dignity, fairness, and respect, and to lead in ways that show I am committed to the overall team's success.

The second lesson is that the two most important words in business and in life are thank you. I haven't encountered anybody who doesn't appreciate hearing those words, especially if you say it in ways that show your sincerity. Writing thank you notes takes a bit more time, of course, but they can make a huge difference for individuals, because it's so seldom that we communicate by pen and ink anymore.

I learned this as I engaged in business turnarounds for much of my career. When I took on challenging situations characterized by poor results, invariably, the biggest issue was how people at all levels of the organization treated each other and engaged with each other. That typically was manifested in senior management's lack of concern for values, norms, and behaviors, and a pervasive focus on blaming people for problems rather than fixing them. This negativity yields hugely disengaged employees who don't feel respected or recognized for their efforts. What I discovered is that a key to a successful turnaround starts with adopting a positive “thank you” approach on day one. People need to be nourished and feel that they are respected.

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

One common challenge I see in leaders is the desire to be liked. It can compromise decision-making, obscure sound judgment, and create the risk of perceived favoritism, which can demotivate the larger team and may hinder the overall success of the organization.

So my advice is that it's okay to want to be liked if—and here's the big if—we couple it with striving

to be respected. That's the delicate balance for leaders. Wanting to be liked isn't inherently negative, and it becomes a strength when paired with the pursuit of respect. As leaders, we often must make difficult decisions that impact the people in our organization—decisions like restructuring or implementing cost reduction strategies. If we prioritize likability over sound judgment, we may avoid addressing challenging issues.

In these conversations, I introduce the concept of two hands for leaders. One is the hard hand of difficult decisions, analysis, rigor, and having the courage to take risks. The other is the soft hand of being part of a team that collaborates effectively and treats everyone with dignity, fairness, and respect. That interplay of using both hands as leaders is what matters most.

With the people I coach, I will ask them a series of questions to find out whether wanting to be liked is clouding their thinking. Are you avoiding difficult decisions or difficult conversations because you're concerned that people won't like you? Do you find yourself playing favorites with members of the team or others due to a desire to be liked? If so, what steps can you take to create a more level playing field where everyone's treated with dignity and respect? Are you building the enterprise with decisions that may be unpopular but are necessary? And how are you presenting yourself to others? Are you sharing your humanity through vulnerability, leading with integrity, honesty, and visibility while you are making decisions?

Another common theme is the importance of being a culture carrier as a leader. The mentees I work with often are frustrated by the culture of their organization. It could be the inability to make decisions, or the inability to implement decisions effectively, or the lack of personal accountability across the organization.

But mentees often don't realize that, as senior leaders, they play an important role as culture carriers. So I advise them to embrace the role of culture carrier and realize that they define the culture 24 hours a day, seven days a week, by their words and their actions. It's an essential part of their leadership, which is a function of both behaviors and results. Results are what we do and behaviors are how we do it. Often, mentees are over-indexed on the results side, and a little bit under-indexed on the behaviors side.

Again, I tend to start these conversations with questions. What are your core leadership principles? How do they align with the stated values of the company? How are they manifested in your daily leadership practice? Have you had in-depth conversations with your team about the current culture? How often do you begin town halls or other large group events with a conversation about the organization's vision and desired culture, and share stories that bring the desired culture to life? Do you have the right team in place to join you as culture carriers for the organization?

When it comes to articulating and creating a desired culture, the CEO and the rest of the senior management team hold the keys to the kingdom. It's not enough just to focus on results. Leaders have to focus on how those results are achieved, in ways that drive sustainable long-term value.