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Reji Cherian'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.

Reji Cherian, executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group, former SVP at Capgemini, and the former CTO at Talavvy Business Catalyst, LLP and Seimens Shared Service Group, shares his key leadership lessons, including why initial perceptions are rarely the complete picture, the tapestry of corporate decisions, and building an authentic aura of confidence.

KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

When I reflect on the more than 36 years I spent in the corporate world, the first and perhaps most consistently relevant lesson is the crucial understanding that initial perceptions are rarely the complete picture. Corporate decisions are intricate tapestries woven with tactical necessities, strategy, goals, and even political and personal agendas. To truly understand the why behind any decision requires a deep dive below the surface. What can appear straightforward often has layers of complexity that demand careful exploration.

One moment earlier in my career drove this lesson home for me. We were engaged in a large program for a particular government in Europe. What we thought was an R&D project was sold to the government as a finished product, and it became somewhat controversial. I had to fly to Europe to resolve the situation and find out what happened. Not surprisingly, the corporate imperative to win the deal overrode the fact that it was a non-tested product. We finally managed to fix it, and everything ended well. But it was a powerful example of how different agendas are often at play inside organizations. And so when I'm faced with these critical decisions now, I often pause, take the time to consider all the factors that may be in play, and get as many data points as I can to understand the full context.

“Initial perceptions are rarely the complete picture.”

The second profound lesson for me revolves around navigating high-stakes boardroom situations. In those moments of heightened tension, you need the ability to resist immediate reaction and to step back to calmly assess and then deliver a considered understanding. You have to weigh the pros and cons with a clear head.

While the aim always is to be just, equitable, and as fair as possible, one must be prepared for the reality that not everyone is going to be happy with your decisions and actions. By holding the higher ground of reason and fairness, even when you are facing predetermined outcomes or stacked odds, you can increase the likelihood of a more balanced perspective prevailing. It's one of the many reasons that these senior leadership positions can feel very lonely.

There was one particular incident that brought this lesson into sharp relief for me. I was the sole Indian board member of a corporation that was set up in India. There was a lot of back and forth with the other directors wanting to push a certain agenda. I realized that there was more going on than them trying to provide good corporate governance. I saw the risk in their agenda, and I called it out. Some people didn't like me saying what I did, but the chairman stood by me.

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

One common theme is the profound sense of vulnerability and self-doubt, even for those at senior levels, regarding the impact of their decisions. Sometimes that comes up when they have a sense of internal conflict about having to deliver messages to their teams, based on decisions made by the board and top leadership, that they may not necessarily agree with. This often leads to introspection and a struggle to project conviction.

That said, I often find that when we explore alternative possible decisions that they might have made if they had been in the ultimate decision role, they often come to understand the rationale behind the organizational choice. But this reality highlights the immense pressure these leaders face in aligning personal conviction with organizational imperatives.

The second prevalent theme is a struggle with identity and a sense of living a dual or double existence. They have to project the sense that they are confident leaders, even though internally they may be feeling a lot of self-doubt. Surprisingly, this isn't typically driven by peer pressure but rather by an innate questioning of their own capabilities and abilities. When I dig deeper, that self-doubt often traces back to ingrained societal and familial expectations of constant achievement. It underscores the challenges many leaders face—reconciling the pressure to always be on top with the reality that

true growth and leadership emerge from embracing failure as a way to learn rather than a personal shortcoming.

When you think about the authentic aura and confidence that we perceive in strong leaders, it often stems from the ability to make decisions while remaining open to reason and being willing to adapt, even if it means momentarily confronting a sense of failure. Embracing setbacks is an integral component of long-term success.