



Great Leaders Are Contrarians. You Need To Have The Courage To Go Against The Grain.

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Savneet Singh, CEO of PAR Technology, a restaurant technology company, shared his key leadership insights on contrarian thinking in business, radical transparency, and leading through adversity in this Art of Leading interview with The ExCo Group's Adam Bryant.

Q. What are the three or four things that are really core to your leadership playbook?

A. Authenticity and transparency guide most of what I do. I am known for telling the truth. When we took over this company, we were 10 weeks away from going bankrupt, and nobody had ever told the employees. We had to fire 25 percent of the workforce, but when we did it, we explained why. And now, every other week I host a town hall where we share the financials, and the good, the bad, and the ugly on where we are at that moment.

Second, active listening is important to me. I've learned over time that I can't do anyone's job at PAR better than they can. So my job as a leader is to be a really active listener, seek out opinions from people throughout the organization, and then have the conviction to make a decision. It's not just about taking in the feedback that's coming to you; it's about seeking out that feedback.

Third, I'm obsessive about communication and being direct with people. I don't think I've ever terminated an executive at PAR without them knowing it was coming. The last thing I'd say is that great leaders are contrarians. You make money in business by making bets that others won't take.

You have to have a bit of a contrarian nature to go against the grain. Otherwise, you'll just be average.

Q. I'm always curious about the stories behind leaders' values. Where does that contrarian thinking come from for you?

A. I had a very unique father. He was an Indian immigrant, and 99 percent of Indian immigrants push their kids to pursue safe career paths like being a doctor or lawyer. My father did the complete opposite. He said, "I suffered to get here. Why wouldn't you try to do something special, like shoot for the stars and land on the moon if you don't make it?"

So when I told him that I wanted to be a professional tennis player when I was 11 years old, he would pick me up from school and drop me off two miles from home and tell me to run home. When I became stronger at sports, he would tell me to drop out of school and try to become a professional. He really ingrained in me this idea that you're only on this earth once, so you might as well make the most of it and not do what everyone else is doing. He used to tell us, "If a cat wants to be a lion, it has to lose its appetite for chasing mice." That's been ingrained in me since childhood.

Q. How do you hire? What qualities do you look for and what questions do you ask job candidates?

A. We value aptitude more than expertise. We do not believe that you have to have the perfect resume. We do believe that you need the right aptitude and cultural attributes. We have hired people in their twenties to run \$100 million business units. We've hired people in their sixties to run business units. Our CFO started in his thirties. I was a CEO of a public company when I was 34. We take risks on people because we believe that sometimes the resume covers up the actual human being inside.

In the hiring process, we obsess about understanding the "why" and the results of every role the person has ever had. For example, were they captain of their sports team? Did they succeed in a prior role, even if they didn't like it? I always ask, what are the three adjectives your manager would use to describe you? What are the three adjectives your family would use to describe you? I want to get a sense of what it's like to work with you and for you.

I also ask, if you get this role, what are the KPIs that you would use to measure your success? That tells you quickly how they view the role. For example, let's say I'm interviewing someone to be head of HR and I ask them how they will measure their success. If they start focusing on employee benefit costs, then it's clear to me that they see HR as a cost center. But I see HR as a culture driver, so we're not going to be aligned there.

In the hiring process, we also focus on our values—act with urgency, own it, deliver outcomes, win together, and never settle. And whether an employee lives those values in their work is a factor in calculating their bonus each year. Ultimately, we are looking for really humble, driven people who have some chip on their shoulder, because maybe they weren't the perfect fit in a previous job. They have a lot to prove to themselves and to the world.

Q. What were some other early influences that shaped your leadership style today?

A. I had a great and normal childhood early on. I was born in the Bronx, and we later moved to upstate New York to a beautiful town called Saratoga Springs. But then in my last year of high school, my dad lost his job in a very unjust manner. We fought it for more than two years—a very emotional

time as well as a difficult time financially—and even though we ultimately won, there was no money left. When I was in college, my grandmother, who was living with us, died in a car crash. Then a year and a half later, my mother was killed in an accident, as well. It was traumatic, and we never really had the chance to be a normal family again after all that time we spent working on my dad's situation.

Then three months after my mother died, I was diagnosed with what I thought was a terminal disease. You can imagine what my father was thinking. He had just lost his wife, and now this. And three weeks after I got my diagnosis, I got fired from a job that I was kicking ass on. It was just blow after blow after blow, but I clawed through it. I also had to become the breadwinner for the family, because my dad wasn't working, and my sister was 18. That's why I became an entrepreneur and started a company.

But having lived through all that, I truly believe that no problem is insurmountable. Nothing makes me sweat. As a leader, I always believe that if you get the right people around the table with the right incentives and you set the right tempo, then we can solve any problem. And we did that here at PAR. When I joined the company, we were on the verge of bankruptcy. Six years later, we were a \$3 billion market cap company.

Q. You've no doubt done a ton of mentoring and coaching of senior executive over your career. What themes come up most often?

A. Generally, the advice I share most frequently with new leaders is to be yourself, and to be authentic to who you are. I often find that when people move into leadership roles, they start acting the way they think they should act. They start talking louder, acting cooler, and wearing nicer clothes. But you need to just be yourself.

I also tell people that if they have a problem, share it with their team. They're there to help you solve it. Don't try to solve it in your own head. One of the most freeing things I've ever done as a leader is to share with everyone here all the challenges we were facing when I took over. I didn't even have to act like I knew the answers, because there were so many answers coming in.

Finally, I tell people that I want them to understand every person on their team, including what motivates them. Because it's going to be different for every single person. Some people are motivated more by money, while others care more about a pat on the back or public notoriety. If you can figure out what they want and align them with what the company wants, then you're in an amazing place to drive results.

Q. What do you consider to be the hardest part of leadership is?

A. Sacrificing time for your family, your friends, and your yourself. When you want to build something big and ambitious, it's an all-out effort. You are giving away lots of time. Being balanced is very tough. That's the hardest part.