



Leaders Who Have Had To Deal With Adversity Don't Panic When Things Get Tough

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Abid Rizvi, chief executive of AriZona Beverage Co., shared his key leadership insights on using the skill vs will matrix for assessing talent, making tough people decisions, and leading with authenticity in this Art of Leading interview with The ExCo Group's Adam Bryant.

Q. What are the core principles of your leadership playbook?

A. You have to be authentic. What you see is what you get with me. You're not going to get one façade in a certain meeting and a different façade in another meeting. People also need to understand that one should always be focused on the greater good.

I often say that I'm not here to make friends. I'll be friendly with anybody, and I've made some great friends along the journey. But I'm here to do a job, and at the end of the day, the only North Star for making a decision is what is best for the business. That includes being able to make tough decisions about personnel. Everybody has to add value.

Q. What were some early influences that really shaped who you are as a leader today?

A. I grew up in Pakistan, and I'm the younger of two boys. My dad had heart issues when I was young—I was five when he had his first serious heart attack. And then, when we lost him, I was 11. In the intervening six years, we were able to get him some medical help, but it was nowhere near

what he needed, because we were a lower-middle-class family in Pakistan and we didn't have the resources to get him the help he needed.

That's been the fire in my belly ever since, because when I went through that at a young age, I vowed to myself that I would never let that happen to anybody else that I love. So I just hunkered down. I had good grades even before then, but I had a very different trajectory from that point on.

I ended up getting a scholarship to my high school, a scholarship to my college, and I finished my undergrad and graduate degrees in four and a half years. I am blessed in that I am now in a position to help out friends and family if they need help. I wanted to make sure that they knew that they only had to make one phone call.

Q. That kind of drive and ambition always carries an implicit cost. How do you think about that?

A. I had to grow up really fast, and I missed out on a lot of fun. Many people look back nostalgically on their teenage years and how much fun they had. I was just driven in a certain direction, because that was the only path available to me. That was my shot.

So I missed out on being a child in some ways, but at the same time, it has served me well. And I have kind of lived vicariously through my own kids, because they've had the luxury of not having to worry about the stuff that I had to worry about at their age.

Q. How do you assess talent?

A. The framework I've used ever since I got my MBA is the skill/will matrix. I try to establish quickly whether somebody is high skill/low will, or low skill/high will, or ideally, high will and high skill.

You want to empower the high will/high skill group. You'll demotivate them if you micromanage them. With people who are high skill but low will, they often just want to be seen and acknowledged. Sometimes it's about compensation, but sometimes it's nothing more than giving them a pat on the back and letting them know they are doing a great job. You often can turn them into high skill/high will pretty quickly.

The people who are high will but low skill need more coaching. You've got to spend some time with them and make sure you help them along the learning curve. With the fourth group—low skill/low will—I've learned over the years that you have to be decisive with them. If you're spending 80 percent of your time with all the problem children, then all the high performers are getting ignored.

Q. So what questions do you ask in job interviews?

A. I want to hear about adversity in their life. What kind of adversity have they faced? How did they deal with it? It may be personal adversity or adversity they have faced in their career. That's important to me because people who have faced adversity, who have that resilience, don't panic when things get tough because they've dealt with a lot worse. When people ask me what I would do in certain tough scenarios, I always say, "I was an 11-year-old fatherless kid in Pakistan. I'll figure it out."

Q. You've no doubt done a lot of coaching and mentoring of senior executives you've worked with over the years. What theme comes up most often?

A. I've read a lot of the research by a psychologist named Gabor Maté. He focuses on how your childhood experience impacts your personality over the course of your life. So one consistent pattern I see is that people may act out of insecurity. And very often, the people themselves don't appreciate that they're insecure.

You almost need to have a therapeutic session with them to understand why they are reacting a certain way, and then provide them with other ways to think about and approach certain situations. It's about making them aware of their triggers and their automatic reactions to things, and then coaching them on how to respond to those situations differently. When they do that successfully, you reinforce and praise them for doing the right thing.

Q. What do you want to be better at in terms of leadership two years from now?

A. Being even more mindful. I'm a Gen Xer, and I find that Gen Z is more sensitive than my generation. So when we're solving a problem, I often say to my team that I want to put the problem in the middle of the table and pound the heck out of it until we have a solution.

But sometimes people see attacking the problem as attacking somebody's idea. So I need to be more careful to make sure that nobody feels like they're getting criticized or attacked when we're attacking a problem. I want to be even more mindful of everybody in the room and make sure that everybody is heard and that everybody feels like their input was welcome.

Q. That's a hard balancing act. You want to be direct and clear as a leader, but also mindful about people possibly taking offense.

A. As I mentioned earlier, I also make it very clear to people here that I'm not here to make friends. I'm here to do a job. So there's always that tension. I don't want to sacrifice what is best for the company just so that I don't offend somebody. That said, I would prefer not to offend anybody.

On a related note, I'm surprised by how many people don't use please and thank you. To me, it's just basic courtesy. If I need to get somebody's buy-in for an idea or a project I want them to work on, I always use please and thank you. I think it's the right thing to do.