



### Keith Millner

COO of Guilford College; Former EVP & COO of Invest Atlanta;  
Former President of CertusBank Georgia Nationwide Financial Network

# Keith Millner's Leadership Lessons

## | ExCo Insights

September 29, 2025

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

Keith Millner, an executive coach and mentor at The ExCo Group, COO of Guilford College, former EVP and COO of Invest Atlanta, and former President of CertusBank Georgia Nationwide Financial Network, shares his key leadership lessons. These include knowing your values, having a bias to action, and knowing how to fail fast and pivot.

### KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

To be an effective leader of others, you have to be an effective leader of yourself. And that means, first and foremost, knowing and understanding your values. Over the years, I've coached many people who were struggling with being a leader. Oftentimes, it came back to them, not really knowing what their values were or leading in ways that were inconsistent with their values. That created a lot of stress, discord, and inconsistencies in their behaviors and actions.

I learned this myself when I was in undergrad. I played quarterback, and I was on athletic and academic scholarships, which was important to my family, because they didn't have the money for tui-

tion. But there were challenges. The coaches weren't very supportive, and the game started not to be fun. I had to take a step back and ask myself why I was playing. Was I committed to continuing to invest the time and effort required to be a great player? I decided that being a scholarship athlete was a means to the end—the “end” was graduating in four years with no debt, not playing football. I changed my attitude about the game. Being a scholarship football player was the same as being a contract employee, hired to perform a job. I committed to performing the job to the best of my abilities, committing to excellence. I played four years, earned the starting QB position in my junior and senior years. I was the first Black starting quarterback in Guilford College history.

## **“To be an effective leader of others, you have to be an effective leader of yourself.”**

About seven years later, I joined a small regional bank with a very paternalistic culture. But they were growing, and there was a need for change. The team I was put in charge of was accustomed to business as usual, keeping their heads down and not taking any risks. But the company hired me to drive more innovation, improvement, and change, and that created a rift with the team because they were not on board.

And I had to, again, take a couple of steps back and ask myself, is this something that I can change or influence? Can I be successful here? And do I want to stay here? All those questions came back to what I value. Did I value professional development? Did I value commitment to excellence? Did I value delivering on the promises that I made to senior management? Did I value building a high-performing team and being a collaborative and communicative leader? Those were the things that I needed to focus on to try and influence the team every day.

The second lesson is about the importance of having a bias to action. When you are in a leadership role, decisions have to be made, even though you may not have perfect information or much time. And that means there is inherently more risk that you might make the wrong decision. Whenever I found myself in a position where I felt paralyzed and didn't make decisions quickly, that became an issue.

So, I developed a bias toward action. I like the idea of failing fast and then pivoting. Learn from your actions and adjust. Because often, there is no definitive right answer. There are usually a range of answers and options, and ultimately, the implementation of the decision often determines whether it was a good decision. You can't implement until you start, and you can't start until you give the direction and the directive. I've always been wired that way. I have an innate level of confidence, and I've always been comfortable with the unknown. Making decisions and instigating change is in my DNA.

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

One issue that comes up often is around time management and work-life integration. I work with senior leaders who have tremendous demands on their time. And many of them are Type A personalities who prioritize their careers over everything else. They often get to a point where there is conflict and

tension with other aspects of their lives—with their families or their health, for example—which in turn often leads to a crisis.

When that happens, the very first thing I do is to ask them what their values are. Then I ask them to show me their calendar. I want to see if their allocation of time is aligned with what they say they value. That creates a level of awareness that often brings about change. When we go through that process, a light bulb usually goes off, and they rethink how they are prioritizing their time.

The second theme that comes up often is around how to give feedback, particularly to peers and colleagues who are not performing at the level they should be, or perhaps they are demonstrating behaviors that are not constructive or contributing to moving the organization forward.

I've found that the people I coach are often eager to give positive feedback. But when it needs to be instructive and prescriptive, they struggle. So, I coach them about how to think about feedback, which is to realize that you are giving people a gift by trying to help them. Maybe you are giving them some perspective about their performance or behavior that they were not even aware of. What the person does with that information is up to them, but they can't decide whether to change unless they know that there is something that needs to be changed.

And it's always important to contextualize the feedback, to the extent you can, by adding specific examples and situations, because people have different perceptions of situations. If there was, say, a heated exchange at work 72 hours earlier that you want to discuss, invariably, people will have very different recollections of how the exchange unfolded or even why there was a disagreement in the first place.