



# The Best Leaders Combine Humility With The Courage To Seek Out and Speak The Truth

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**Ray Kleeman, CHRO at RGA (Reinsurance Group of America), shared timely insights with The ExCo Group's David Reimer and Adam Bryant on how value is created through talent, culture, and leadership, the impact of what you role-model, tolerate, and reward, and the importance of setting clear expectations.**

**Reimer: What's top of mind for you as you're navigating all the leadership challenges of the moment?**

**Kleeman:** I always start with what I know to be true, which is how value is created in an organization, and that is through talent, culture, and leadership. Whenever I feel like I'm in the morass of complexity, I always try to anchor myself back into that fundamental truth.

All companies have a strategy to create results. But to get from strategy to results, you need people to do stuff. We call it fancy things like strategic action through organizational capability, but people just have to do stuff that's aligned with the strategy that you're trying to deliver, and that happens through talent, culture, and leadership.

And the most important is always leadership, because it role-models and creates the culture and connects talent to it. It coaches and develops talent for impact, and it inspires and creates energy. If you get leaders focused on role-modeling the intentional culture, coaching talent for impact, and

creating energy through inspiration, you can deal with any complexity that's happening in the world.

**Bryant: How do you think about coaching your leaders, particularly for impact?**

**Kleeman:** We always say to leaders that you get what you role-model, tolerate and reward. I often ask them to look at the team they are leading. Take a piece of paper. Put a line down the middle, with positive and negative columns on each side of it. Write down everything the team is doing that you love.

Then write down everything you wish they would do differently or better. Then I say, "Pick something on the negative column and look in the mirror. What are you role modeling, tolerating or rewarding that's creating the condition. Because it sits in your chair and no one else's. You get what you role-model, tolerate, and reward."

In terms of impact, it ties back to operational clarity that we're trying to elevate inside the organization, starting with OKRs—objectives and key responsibilities. You'd be amazed by how many people are not clear about what they are accountable for. Or they are clear, but their OKRs are misaligned with their peers and the broader strategy.

You cannot coach and develop for impact unless you clarify expectations, and the metrics behind those expectations should be aligned across the organization. Simplicity matters, and you can have massive impact just by having good conversations.

The third point is about creating and sustaining energy. Leaders deal with at least two forms of currency—how much tension you create or reduce, and how much energy you create or reduce. A very simple framework I share with leaders is to make a little grid, with high-to-low tension on one axis, and high-to-low energy on the other. Then I ask them to tell me where they are as a leader right now on that grid. Where's your energy and your tension level?

If you are tense and tired, where do you think everybody else is going to be? And then I ask, what can you do about it as a leader? You can apply that at an organizational level, as well. It's a very simple framework that opens up dialogue. Just asking people how they are on those two dimensions starts to reduce tension and starts to create energy. And if that flywheel starts going, you can have a shot at sustaining it.

**Reimer: What are the two or three X-factors that you look for in your best leaders these days?**

**Kleeman:** The first is humility. They always start from a position of doing what is best for the enterprise and what is best for others. When I see leaders who start from a me-first point of view, or they are overly focused on their own part of the business, that's always a red flag for me. We are all human, and ego and ambition can get in the way. But the best leaders can push that aside. They are motivated by being there for others.

Another is the courage to seek and speak the truth. They're a touch skeptical. They examine. They listen hard. They're constantly seeking the truth of whatever they're dealing with. They're willing to ask the tough question, and they're willing to listen to responses.

But they also have the courage to speak the truth. They're willing to offer their perspective and point of view and opinion. When that's coupled with humility, those two things together can be enormously impactful and can help set the right tone in an organization.

The third is digital dexterity. These leaders are constantly thinking about how to leverage technology for their domain or area of responsibility. They're proactive about it, and even a touch obsessed with it. They are always thinking that there's got to be something that's better that they can leverage.

**Bryant: Personal responsibility and accountability is obviously an important theme for you. Where does that come from?**

**Kleeman:** My family. Both my parents still live in Cincinnati. My dad never went to college. He was an electrician, probably the smartest guy I know. He could fix anything. He could take something apart, figure out what was wrong with it and fix it. I picked up that same kind of orientation. I can generally figure out how to fix things. My mom was a nurse her entire life.

They were very clear with us from an early age that they were going to put us through the best schools they could afford through high school, and then we were going to go to college and graduate school. But that's on your nickel, they said. They didn't care what we studied or what we did afterward. But we were expected to go to college and graduate school and find a way to pay for it ourselves. Those were the rules of the road growing up.