



When I Hire Someone, I Empower Them Completely And Give Them 100% Support

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Janet Garcia, CEO of PSI Services and President of ETS, shares her leadership philosophy with Adam Bryant. Garcia explores the power of people-first leadership, the importance of authentic values-driven culture, and why empowering your team with complete trust drives faster results.

Q. What values are core to your leadership style?

A.One is authenticity. I am an open book. That's not to say I'm indiscreet. I'm a CEO, and I have information that I often can't share. But what you see is what you get with me, and I will always answer questions honestly. I'm the same person with front-line workers as I am in the boardroom.

I've also learned that successful leadership is waking up every morning and thinking, how can I serve my people better? It's not how they can serve me better. When I'm frustrated with a result, I will look to myself first and ask, how could I have created an environment so that this didn't happen?

Q. Were you interested in leadership early on?

A. I studied law at university because I didn't know what I wanted to do. But when I was studying contract law, I was always more interested in the business case than I was in the legal aspects of it. So I had this sense that I wanted to be in business.

And as I started working in organizations, I always watched the leaders and the impact of their different styles. Some of them brought out the best in me and made me want to work harder and achieve better results. And there were those who did the opposite.

All those experiences informed my leadership style, and I seemed to inspire enough confidence in people that they would follow, and I was rapidly given more responsibility. I was never demanding of it. I was just genuinely curious, interested in people, and ambitious to push myself and those around me to achieve results.

Part of it was a search for being stimulated. I feel privileged that I have a job that stimulates every part of my brain. I get my energy and stimulation through the diversity of work that leadership gives you.

My father was also a role model. He was the CEO of a manufacturing company. He was always incredibly fair to everyone. I didn't realize it at the time, of course, but even as I was a shift worker in one of his factories, I was learning from him about the kind of leader I wanted to become.

Q. What's the best lesson you learned from a bad manager?

A. I worked for one leader whose values were very different from mine. Experience has taught me that the more I lean into my teams to support them, the better the results. I witnessed the complete reverse of that under him, where the public dressing down of someone was worn as a badge of honor.

I lasted nine months in that job. I gave him feedback two times, and on the third, I realized that this is not going to work. It was his business, and he could lead it the way he wanted. I needed to change, and I resigned. It was a negative experience but it taught me a lot about how much my values mean to me.

Q. What about earlier influences? What were you like as a kid?

A. I was never great at sports. I'm only five foot two, and I'm not blessed with a lot of ball-eye coordination. But I loved the competitiveness, the concept of working together in a team, and the winning.

I was a coxswain for a rowing club, and I did that to quite a competitive level. There were a lot of parallels for leadership, because the coxswain is essentially dead weight in the boat. But you own the plan, and you're steering—you have to bring value to the team as captain to help them make the boat go faster.

It's the same now as a CEO. My job is to enable the crew to go faster with me in the boat than they would without me.

Q. When you're hiring, what are the X factors you're looking for in a candidate?

A. I have to know that the fit is right and I can bring out the best in them, so I will ask about previous bosses they had who did that for them and why. We also have to share a common set of values, because I can't tolerate anyone who undermines the culture I am trying to create.

That's not to say I don't embrace diversity, because I absolutely do. I don't want everyone to be

a clone of me. I love the people on my team who bring other experiences and think differently. I deliberately hire people who think differently, but not with a different set of core values.

Q. What should people know about what it's like to work with you day-to-day if they are a direct report to you?

A. I spend a lot of time on talent and hiring. Once I hire someone, I will empower them completely, and they will have my 100 support. This was one of the most effective things that someone did for me much earlier in my career, about 20 years ago.

The CEO I reported to said, "This is how it's going to work. I trust you to do the job. I will back any decision you make, because it's more important to me that you are out there making decisions and leading your business than to worry about the one or two decisions that you make that maybe I wouldn't have. You and I will talk about them behind closed doors, but any decision you make, I will back, because we will go faster that way."

And I literally give people that same speech now when they join my team. They will feel completely empowered, and I will back them. They need to keep me informed and never surprise me, but I will back their decisions. And they have to be comfortable with that. Because I found that unbelievably motivating earlier in my career, I've adopted the same approach.

Q. What are some common themes that have come up when you've coached senior executives on all your teams?

A. One is around people and relationships. Some leaders are more comfortable with certain people on their teams, and they mistake that sense of trust for overestimating their capabilities. If someone on their team has done their job at a certain level, then the temptation is often there to promote them to their level of incompetence.

The other common theme is them not thinking big enough or long-term enough. They might be focused too myopically on the problem at hand and not thinking about the problem behind the problem. So I'm often pushing people to see the bigger picture.

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

A. Making decisions when you don't have all the information you really need. At my level, decisions are rarely clear-cut, right or wrong. It's usually about balancing the risk of doing something differently against the risk of carrying on with what you're doing. But the most important thing is to make the decision. A mediocre decision well-executed is better than a really good decision badly executed.