



Leadership Is Not A Rank: Find Fulfillment In The Achievement Of Others

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Guy Yehiav, President of SmartSense by Digi, joins this conversation led by Adam Bryant and David Reimer to explore three pillars of his leadership approach: the value of direct, explicit communication shaped by his Israeli army training; hiring curious leaders who push back rather than nod along; and the practice of finding fulfillment in the achievement of others because leadership is not a rank.

Q. What's important to know about your leadership style?

A. The four things I care about most are grit, care, resiliency, and stamina. I'm also very direct. I've found that being direct and cutting to the chase saves a lot of time and effort.

I'm Israeli, and I grew up in many places, including Belgium and the UK. But I was in the Israeli army for four years, and I learned that sometimes seconds can save lives. So you'd better be direct about your goals and what you want to do. You'd better be explicit, so that the goal will not be interpreted five different ways.

That said, I still believe that I'm not the best communicator. I will often ask people on my executive team to send me a note after we finish a call to share with me what they took away from the meeting. I want to make sure we're aligned.

Q. Not everyone appreciates a super-direct boss. Has your approach evolved over time?

A. When we built our first company, I knew that I wasn't ready to be a CEO, so we hired a CEO from the outside. I was too direct. I thought everyone should think like me and execute like me. And if somebody didn't do a good job, I would jump in myself and execute the work rather than guiding people and helping them learn.

ART OF LEADING

But ultimately, I had to learn to scale. Not everyone is like me, and that's good. You need different perspectives to help you understand what you don't know. I had some amazing coaches over the years who taught me to let people learn from their own mistakes, guide them with clear messaging, give them accountability, and support them. Everyone wants to do the right thing, but they just need some guidance from time to time.

Q. Were you in leadership roles early on in life?

A. I moved so many times while I was growing up that I learned to lead to make friends. When I was eight years old, my parents moved us from Israel to a French-speaking area of Belgium. I didn't know French, and we moved there in the middle of the school year. I didn't even understand what the teacher was saying.

I needed to make friends, so I created a small league of basketball teams for the students, even though I was pretty bad at basketball myself. Otherwise, no one wanted to speak with me because I didn't know French.

Q. If someone were joining your leadership team from the outside, what should they know about working for you day-to-day? What do you like, and what do you not like?

A. I don't like indirection, hiding things, or not giving me feedback. I want the good, the bad, and the ugly. If I ask for feedback, I don't want people to say, "It's all great." You have to have feedback.

I also value results over effort. An investor of mine told me years ago that the only two jobs where people get paid for effort are lawyers and consultants. Everyone else in business is measured based on results. Results come from effort, of course, and if you put in the work—with grit, stamina, and resiliency—you'll get the results. So, we celebrate efforts, but measure results.

I've also learned about myself that I carry the burden of losses longer than I enjoy the wins. I hate to lose. Some people only hear the good things, but I'm the opposite. I'm usually expecting bad news and listening for the negative. I've told my leadership team that they need to remind me to celebrate the wins, and also to celebrate the efforts that will lead to wins.

Q. How do you hire, particularly for someone who will be a direct report?

A. I mentioned earlier the things that matter most to me. In interviews, I also really like to test for curiosity. I'll often ask people what they believe about a particular topic, and then I will disagree with them. It doesn't matter if I actually disagree with them. I want to see how they respond, because I need to know that they will push back and disagree with me. I'm looking for a discussion or approach around the disagreement.

I don't need someone like me around the table. I don't need someone who doesn't tell me what they really believe. I need someone with curiosity to learn more.

Q. There's a fine line between someone who is willing to disagree and someone who is simply disagreeable. So what are your antennae to determine whether someone will be a good fit?

A. I always say that if there's doubt, there's no doubt. If I have a doubt about someone, then I won't hire them, because the cost of hiring the wrong person is very high. If I have doubts about the core qualities of someone, then I won't hire them. But if the doubt is about a particular skill set, then I assume that the skill can be learned.

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

A. I hate to fail. I hate to lose, but sometimes my team needs to fail in order to succeed. For me, that's the toughest part of leadership. I might have done something better or taken a different approach. But with leadership, you need to find fulfillment in the achievement of others. Their success is your success. This is why leadership is not a rank.