



Want A New Role? Just Raise Your Hand And Ask For It. And Don't Take No For An Answer.

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Yvette Ostolaza, chair of the management committee of Sidley Austin, shared bold leadership insights with Adam Bryant. Key themes include the power of relentless curiosity and continuous learning, how first-generation experiences build comfort with ambiguity, and why raising your hand and refusing to take no for an answer is the fastest path to growth.

Bryant: What is core to your leadership playbook?

Ostolaza: I believe that leaders evolve, and that you need to be relentlessly curious and continue to learn. I find that too many people think that leadership skills are innate. It's true to some degree, but I do think that leadership can be, and needs to be, learned.

I believe in transparency and having direct conversations with people. I believe in looking around corners and scanning the horizon. I'm also a believer in liberal arts education and taking ideas and insights from many different areas and incorporating them into your life.

And I want people to succeed. I get the most joy from getting the best out of our teams-understanding what they're great at and helping them to unlock that.

Bryant: What is your playbook as you've moved up in your career and stepped into new leadership roles?

Ostolaza: Taking on a new role is an opportunity to make changes after you see what's working and what is not working. It should involve a lot of listening and asking people, How can I support you? What are we doing well? How can we improve?

At every stage in my career, I found a way to get feedback and input from a team and develop a plan that's executable, with a clear vision and expectations. I've also learned to surround myself with people who will challenge me intellectually.

Bryant: There are so many skills that leaders need these days, and an increasingly important one is being comfortable with ambiguity. Where does that come from for you?

Ostolaza: My parents were born in Cuba, and I was the first in my family to go to college. As a first-generation American, you sometimes live in ambiguity. That is your daily environment. How do you apply to college? How do you talk to the doctor? I grew up fast because I was the voice for my family in many ways.

I also think certain personality types are okay with ambiguity. I go back to the idea of relentless curiosity. Some people like to be an expert in a particular area. That's where they feel comfortable, and we certainly need people like that in the legal profession. And then some people have broader interests. They are always scanning the horizon and trying to make connections.

You need both types of people in organizations, but I do think leaders typically have that broader view, especially if you're in a large, multinational organization. We are a global firm with 21 offices on four continents. We deal with so many industries, and you need to have that broad view.

I've had a lot of different experiences in my life, and I had different jobs before I went to law school. I really like that creative side of law-trying to see around corners to understand where the law is going.

Bryant: What were some early jobs you had when you were younger?

Ostolaza: My parents were dealing with medical issues when I was a teenager. I was at a Sears store, and I saw there was an opening, and I applied. I worked there throughout high school, dealing with all sorts of customer problems. I often say that everything I learned about people I learned working in the customer service department at Sears.

Bryant: What was a lasting lesson from all the jobs that helped you get ahead later in your career?

Ostolaza: If you want to do something, raise your hand. Sometimes when I would move into a new role, people would ask me how I got the job. And I would explain to them that I just raised my hand and asked for it. I also don't easily take no for an answer.

Bryant: When you hire, what qualities are you looking for, and what questions do you ask in job interviews?

Ostolaza: In terms of success factors, I look for a track record of intensity and work ethic. Given how quickly the world is changing, in part because of AI, I'm looking for flexibility. And the quality of likability is

important-do people want to be around you?

In the interview, I often ask, what is it that really drives you? What do you enjoy most about the work you're doing? If it's a lateral move and someone wants to change law firms, I will ask them, what are you looking for in your next law firm? It can be anything, but I want to know what they are looking for so I can make sure there is going to be a good match. And if I don't think there will be a good match, I'll tell the person why. I want people to be successful here over the long term.

Bryant: What do you find is the hardest part of leadership?

Ostolaza: There are not enough hours in the day to achieve everything you want to achieve. But it's important that you don't become a person who all you do is work. I've always found a way to balance that. I think good leaders find time for vacations, to disconnect, and to spend time with their family. Some leaders don't do that, and I've seen them grow resentful, and they expect people on their teams to live the same way.

You should always be evaluating decisions about how you spend your time to avoid feeling regret. I constantly do that because you're not going to be a good leader if you have regrets.