



The Best Leaders Remove All The Sources of Friction That Sap An Organization's Energy

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Stephen Smith, former CEO of L.L. Bean, shared candid leadership insights with Adam Bryant. Key themes include leading with empathy, integrity, and transparency, why intentional energy management prevents burnout, and how the best leaders remove friction that saps organizational energy.

Bryant: What values are core to your leadership style?

Smith: My values are incredibly consistent, and I talk about them every time I've moved into a new role. My three values are empathy, integrity, and transparency. They drive my leadership style, my cultural expectations, and the behaviors I expect from people with whom I work.

Bryant: Can you unpack each of those?

Smith: Empathy, to me, means putting yourself in the shoes of the person you're communicating with or trying to persuade and bring along, and then adjusting what you're saying or doing to meet them where they are. Humility is a big part of it, too. You may have very strongly held beliefs, but you have to have the humility and curiosity to want to understand another person's views, even if they are the polar opposite of what you believe.

Integrity is incredibly simple, just do the right thing. The test is always, what do you do when someone's not watching? I know that's a cliché, but it's useful guidance. Another point about integrity is that if you never lie, then you never need to remember what you've said before about something. I've seen people get tangled up in their own webs.

Transparency ties all those things together. It's about giving the organization as much context as you possibly can, so that they understand the frame within which decisions are being made.

Bryant: You were CEO of L.L. Bean for just over a decade. That's a relatively long tenure for a CEO. How did you keep reinventing yourself?

Smith: I believe in having critics and engaging critics, and you can only do that if you're authentically open to hearing what they have to say. I also had a coach through my entire tenure as CEO, and she challenged me and never let me off the hook.

I also changed the executive team a couple of times. I'm a passionate believer in the strategy-structure-role-people approach to building your team. When you change your strategy, you have to change the structure to support that strategy. You then need to define the roles within that structure and then have the right people in those roles. I did that pretty consistently.

Bryant: The CEO role is so demanding. There's always too much work and not enough time. What was your approach to dealing with that?

Smith: I coach people in these senior roles to be really intentional about energy management. I had long thought about my own energy management as a leader in terms of physical energy and intellectual energy. But during Covid and the Black Lives Matter movement, employees were looking to their leaders for emotional stability, and this added emotional energy to energy management.

And especially during Covid, I realized I could be working 16 hours a day, seven days a week. All the work was unsustainable, and I had to figure out how to create better barriers to make sure I could recharge. That's why I coach people all the time to find ways to assess their energy levels and make sure they are truly taking the time to recharge. Otherwise, you're going to burn out.

Bryant: What were important early influences for you?

Smith: I'm competitive. I've always been an athlete, and I was captain of sports teams early on. I like to win. I like to build teams, and I like to be on a team. Being a CEO is all of that, and it's motivating.

I'm also relationship-oriented. There are a lot of definitions of leadership, but one of my favorites is building great teams, giving them all the context you can, and then the autonomy to go and achieve results.

Another big influence was my dad, who was an incredibly hard worker. After his sophomore year in college, he left to join the Army and became a sergeant. When he got out, he started in the mail room at Time magazine in New York City, and worked his way up to production director of Time and Sports Illustrated. Fairness was also very important to him, and he always treated everybody with a huge amount of respect.

I also learned a lot from my mom and her parents and brother, who were always building and creating. They loved doing things with their hands and making stuff. So I always was intrigued by how things get built and how things get done.

A big part of leadership for me is identifying potential in people that they don't see in themselves, and then helping them achieve beyond that potential. It's so rewarding to see something in somebody, have confidence in them, and then watch them achieve big things.

I have benefited from that myself. I have had many bosses who have put me in jobs that I didn't think I was ready for or was qualified for, but they saw something in me.

Bryant: How do you hire?

Smith: I look for collaboration and curiosity. Curiosity is an interesting mix of humility and trying to understand things. And one question I always ask people is, what are you most proud of? I love this open-ended question to see where people go with their answer. They'll often talk about their family, which I love. And I will prompt for a work answer also.

Do they talk about how they've been a talent factory, and dozens of people who worked for them have been promoted into bigger roles? Or do they talk about what they just achieved personally? There's no right or wrong answer, but it helps me get a feel for what drives them.

Bryant: What are the most common themes that come up when you've coached and mentored people?

Smith: One goes back to empathy, and recognizing the impact you have on people. Sometimes a manager or leader will say they are frustrated that their message isn't being heard. So I will tell them that they need to understand how their direct reports process information, and then adjust their style to them.

Leaders also need to remember that they are in a position to connect dots from across the organization, and that they shouldn't get frustrated when people on their teams don't see the bigger picture. Instead, they should spend more time sharing the broader context with their teams.

Bryant: What is the best lesson you learned from one of your mentors?

Smith: Shelley Broader was one of my best bosses, and I worked with her in several companies. I learned a ton from her, including the phrase "no walls make for great work."

It was about breaking down silos in a retail environment we worked in together, where there were real fiefdoms and knowledge was power. We came in as a new leadership team, and we needed to move fast.

Bryant: What is the wisest thing you've ever read, heard, or said about leadership?

Smith: I really like the idea that leaders remove friction. When you peel that back, it's about removing all the sources of friction that can be an energy sap for the organization, whether it's friction in relationships, business strategy, communication, or anything else that is causing them to slow down in the work that they're doing. I've loved that really simple statement about leadership for a long time.