

To Stand Out in the Crowd, Pick a Few Things That Are Different and Then Stick to Them

With **Tony D'Onofrio**, President of Sensormatic Solutions

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[Tony D'Onofrio](#), President of [Sensormatic Solutions](#), shared his key leadership lessons with [Adam Bryant](#). Key themes include the power of prioritization and continuous learning, why embracing change is the surest path to growth, and how a service mindset forged through early jobs and an immigrant's determination to stand out shapes his approach to leadership and mentoring.

Q. What is core to your leadership playbook?

A. I have three principles that I live by—integrity, curiosity, and leadership. I'm a big believer that we're all part of the same team. We're all trying to drive the same outcome. I like to give more credit than I get because if I make you feel successful, you're going to help make me successful.

When we do town halls, I give a lot of awards. And I do pizza luncheons, a tradition I started years ago. I ask my team to bring somebody to the lunch who had a positive impact on the quarter, and then we talk about the results over pizza and what we're going to do next.

I'm also a firm believer that you have to prioritize. You have to pick your top three priorities and make sure they are your top three priorities and drive them to get something done.

Q. Is there a story behind how you learned the importance of prioritization?

A. I was born in Italy. I came to the U.S. as a child. I didn't speak a word of English, and during my first two years here, I struggled to understand the culture, and I missed my little town in Italy where I was born. But then I noticed that if you want to stand out in the crowd, you have to pick things that are different and always go the extra mile. And once you pick them, stick to them.

I've been doing that my entire life. Once you find a formula that works, drive it like crazy and adapt when you need to, but make sure you're focusing on the right things. We have so many disruptions and distractions. The key is understanding what you're trying to do and where you're trying to go in life.

Q. What about your early years? What kind of things were you doing outside of school?

A. I started working early. I figured out that you can make money in America if you're creative. So my first job was singing Italian songs at birthday parties, and then having my cousin pass around the hat. I created bocce tournaments for the neighborhood. I did all kinds of ways to stretch myself, to get out of my comfort zone.

When I was 14, I told a retailer I was 16 and they hired me. So I worked there for nine years while I was in school, including to supplement the scholarship I got for college. I enjoyed the work, and I learned a lot. There were days when I would go to school, work on the night crew, and then go back to school the next day.

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

A. The hardest part is when you are transitioning a business, and you have to cut costs and let people go. Every one of us has a family. We all have lives that we want to live. That's the hard part of getting to certain levels in your career—dealing with the human element of tough decisions.

Ultimately, I want everyone to succeed in life, but not everybody's got the skills. If you're not on a journey of continuous learning and evaluating who you are, which I do every single day, you're going to fall behind. And technology is now going to accelerate you falling behind.

Q. How do you hire? What questions do you ask in a job interview?

A. I look for curiosity and continuous learning. I want to see that they've done their homework to understand our company. I want to hear that they have some ideas to pitch me about where we go next. I want to know what they plan to do, and what they would do differently than we're doing now. Because technology is moving faster, I'm looking for people who have a sense of urgency.

Q. What should a direct report know about working for you?

A. What drives me nuts are missed deadlines. If you tell me you're going to do something by a certain date, I expect you to do it. I don't want to hear a million excuses. So deadlines are critical to me. We've got to get stuff done, and we're going to get stuff done.

Q. When you coach and mentor senior executives, what themes come up most often?

A. A lot of people are afraid of change. What fueled my career is the opposite—I aggressively chase change. Change is accelerating. If you embrace change, you actually move faster to your next level. That's part of the journey.

You will make mistakes, but don't dwell on those. Focus more on the successes and figure out how to build to the next thing. Getting out of your comfort zone is not easy. I was lucky that I was forced out of it when I moved to a new country and from a little town to a big city.

Q. What is the best piece of advice that you heard from a mentor of yours over the years?

A. The best advice was to take the chances but never burn bridges. Make every move to another company sound like a win for the company you're leaving, because you're going to go learn something new and you're going to expand your capabilities. Then stay in touch and hold out the possibility of working together again. Every time I've left a company, I've written elaborate notes about how my moving on is going to help us both.

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In this conversation



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Adam Bryant is a respected and noted expert on executive leadership who has interviewed more than 1,000 leaders for the “Corner Office” series he created at The New York Times and for his four current leadership series on LinkedIn. He is the author of four books on leadership, including “[The Leap to Leader](#)” and “[The CEO Test](#),” both published by Harvard Business Review Press.

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