



People Often Refer To "Executive Presence." But I Prefer To Call It "Executive Depth."

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Sue Sun-LaSovage, Global VP of Human Resources at Indium Corporation, shared candid insights with Adam Bryant and David Reimer. Key themes include why trust, and never lying, is the foundation of leadership in a polarized world; why she interviews candidates in a coffee shop to uncover the distance between where they started and what they built; and why she prefers "executive depth" to executive presence as the true measure of a leader.

Reimer: What is top of mind for you these days?

Sun-LaSovage: How do we sustain success in this crazy world? How is your company adapting? You can't just follow the current trends. You have to stay true to your core, focus on the right things, and succeed in ways that are good for the country, the community, and humanity.

With all the pressures we face in corporate America, sometimes we can lose the humanity of the work we do. But we are here to serve people, and you have to treat your people well. The core is building trust.

Bryant: What does living your values mean today in a polarized world where leaders can be punished for speaking up and also punished for not speaking up? How do you find the right ground to stand on?

Sun-LaSovage: You have to be a good person, and that starts with never lying. I never want to work for someone who only says things based on which way the wind is blowing, because that person will only do what is required, even if it's wrong. That kind of person cannot build longevity in their career or attract the best people. You have to walk the talk. The trust has to be there.

Reimer: Given the importance of trust to you, how do you interview job candidates to find out what kind of person they are at their core?

Sun-LaSovage: The interview should never take place in an office, with me sitting across a desk from them. After all, many people know how to come up with formulaic, practiced answers. You have to get people into different environments, like a coffee shop, where they will feel comfortable.

Ultimately, you want them to tell you stories that give you an insight into who they are as a person. I want to hear about their life stories, difficult challenges, the risks they took, and how they broke through. Most important to me is understanding the delta that they created between where they started in life and what they created for themselves. After all, that's what I want them to do in their role: to transform things and make them better than how they found them.

Bryant: When you give people mentoring advice, what topics come up most often?

Sun-LaSovage: Mostly those conversations are about curiosity and listening. But I've always found that you need more of an indirect way to start those conversations, rather than trying to simply tell people that they should change.

You have to build the foundation for that conversation, tell a story, share a specific example, and then ask them what they want to achieve. You want them to think for themselves about what they can do better or differently. Otherwise, the advice will just go in one ear and out the other.

Reimer: When you think about your evolution as a manager and as a leader, was there a piece of advice somebody shared with you that had a big impact?

Sun-LaSovage: When I first moved into a senior leadership role at a large company, I found it difficult to maneuver inside this matrixed organization. How do you influence others, especially when my style is a bit different and maybe too fast? I needed to slow down and bring people along.

My boss gave me an external coach who helped me map out all my key stakeholders. That coach also taught me how to bring them along to be more invested in what I needed to achieve, and how I could also help them with their goals.

Many people in business talk about "executive presence." But I prefer to call it "executive depth." It's about being thoughtful and intentional about driving change on a bigger scale.

Bryant: What do you consider to be the hardest part of leadership?

Sun-LaSovage: Making hard decisions. It's a challenge, for example, when you have to transform a company that is generally doing well. The impulse often will be to hang on to that success, and so you're less likely to take risks. But if you don't take enough risks, then you'll fall behind. It's about having the courage to pivot, even if you're successful.