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THE ART OF LEADING

When I Hire, I Want to Know Your Capacity to Figure Things Out and Get Things Done

With **Glenn Kelman**, Former CEO at Redfin

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Glenn Kelman, **former CEO of Redfin, shared candid lessons from two decades at the helm with Adam Bryant. Key themes include why a leader's emotional state ripples through the entire organization, how to deliver hard feedback with full candor but without excess emotion, and why he hires for drive and the capacity to figure things out and get things done over experience.**

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Bryant: You were CEO of Redfin for 20 years. What are the big lessons you learned along the way?

Kelman: There are two major lessons, and both of them are so obvious that I'm embarrassed that it took me this long to figure them out. The first is that I used to judge myself on, in effect, the number of keystrokes per minute. It was about clear ways to measure my productivity.

I would work until two in the morning, and then I'd come in the next day grouchy and feeling like I'd sacrificed myself for the company, and then I wasn't at my best. My lowest lows weren't from a strategic mistake; it was because I wasn't the leader I wanted to be.

> **"There's a ripple effect from leaders that goes through the organization, and it can be a very positive ripple, or it can be a negative ripple. You just want it to be a positive ripple as many days as possible."**

Instead of someone thinking that maybe I didn't get enough sleep or that I got a flat tire on the way to work, they instead would think I'm grouchy because someone didn't do good work. The impact that I have on other people really affects me.

So now I'm really careful about making sure that if I'm going to provide some emotional component of leadership to them, I have to be at my best. There's a ripple effect from leaders that goes through the organization, and it can be a very positive ripple, or it can be a negative ripple. You just want it to be a positive ripple as many days as possible.

Maybe the most intolerable emotion that people can feel from a CEO or any leader is contempt. And I hope I haven't shown anyone contempt in many years, but I remember every time I did that, and I'm sure the person on the other end of it felt it, too.

You just feel so much pressure sometimes, you want to get this result, and then some well-meaning person comes in and has a different idea of what was wanted, and then you show not just frustration but contempt. It's unforgivable. You have to earn the right to lead people by being a good emotional leader. And in my 20s and 30s, I didn't give that enough weight.

Bryant: Leadership is hard because it's a series of endless balancing acts, including balancing compassion with also holding people accountable.

Kelman: If you're a leader who cares about how other people feel, you sometimes don't tell them what they need to hear. There's a big theme now about how candor is kindness. What's hard for me is to give people the whole burrito but without the hot sauce.

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Sometimes you can be too indirect and tell people that it would be nice if they could delegate just a little bit more. That's different from telling the same person that they are a micromanager and they've got to change in the next 60 days or else. Sometimes it was so hard for me to deliver the whole burrito that I never did it until I also delivered it with hot sauce.

I'm not a yeller, but if you're saying something with more emotion, even if it's in a level pitch, it's really hard for people to absorb it. Sometimes early in my career, I oscillated between no candor and full candor, but it would get to a point when it was either too late or when there really was more emotional weight to it than was constructive.

Another dichotomy is that to be an entrepreneur you have to be this optimist, but you also have to see what's wrong with your company. So there's this restlessness where you think things could be so much better, and there's this optimism that we could win.

I go back and forth between seeing everything that's wrong and then being optimistic. And I go back and forth between being empathetic and being very driven. You just have to get better and better at it.

Bryant: That balancing act of being empathetic but also willing to have the tough conversation can be so hard to work through. How did you learn to do that?

Kelman: I tricked myself by writing down what I would tell my successor if he or she had to inherit a particular person. So if somebody else were taking over from me to manage Jane or Bob, I would say to them something like, "You need to move on from her, or he has to get better at this." So I would think about what someone else would do in my shoes, and then I would try to make myself do it by saying, "Well, you are that person, and you have to do it."

I've also gotten faster about firing people because if you wait six months, then all we've done is driven each other crazy. I thought I was being kind by waiting, or that each of us would try harder and do better. But usually, when two people don't belong together, they just don't work well together. I know people who have not thrived under my leadership, but they thrived working with someone else.

Bryant: What did you learn over your years about the cultural signals of a company that really matter, and what are the ones that don't?

Kelman: You should spend time thinking about the words that go on the wall, but what you do is more important. The fundamental cultural value at Redfin was that "everybody sweeps the floors," and that doesn't work if you're boarding a plane with a colleague, and you stop at row two, and you send them down to row 32.

So that means you're going to be flying coach for the rest of your days as the CEO. It doesn't work if you put a dish in the sink and expect somebody else to clean it up. It limited who we could hire. Some people want the executive parking spot, and it just wasn't how we were built.

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You're going to have to find some way to be distinctive, because a lot of cultural values are common across all businesses. But there should be a couple of values that are unique to your company. Whatever that is, there has to be deep conviction behind it where you're willing to sit in row 32 for it.

Bryant: How did your approach to interviewing job candidates evolve over the years?

Kelman: When I was young, all I cared about was talent, and I discounted experience, and that's still my approach. I care about how big your motor is, how much you care, and then your capacity to figure things out and get stuff done. There's a book about hiring engineers called "Smart and Gets Things Done." At first, I thought, aren't those the same thing?

But some people can be brilliant and do not have a knack for getting things done. And then other people may not have done well academically but are really good at finding the shortest distance between two points.

Also, you have to be aware that any hiring leader is surrounded by people who just want to fill the role. There's a recruiter who's paid to do that. There's an HR department that's anxious to move on. The whole team just needs some help. But you're going to be alone if you have to fire that person. I need to feel comfortable before I say yes.

And the more you can simulate what the actual working environment is, the better, because we've all had that experience where three hours into somebody's first day on the job you find out they don't know how to type or they just have some weird thing about them where it's obvious that they're not going to be able to do the work.

Bryant: Are there certain questions that you always ask?

Kelman: I usually ask people what their favorite job was, and then I ask myself, how similar is that to what we're offering right now? I'm also wary of people who describe their career like a Lemony Snicket book, a series of unfortunate events where they've had bad luck over and over again.

By the way, we've all had bad luck. There are times when you are in a situation where you just can't win no matter what you do. But some people can only thrive in environments that are so highly constrained.

You're almost like some Central American salamander that can survive only between 1,200 and 1,500 feet with a certain amount of rainfall. You need to find people who are more like cockroaches than those kinds of salamanders.

Bryant: You've obviously got a lot of drive and ambition. Where does that come from for you? Why do you want to start another company?

Kelman: It's not financial for me. This may sound silly, but I want to be a productive member of society. I feel like whatever talent I have, I want to use it to make things better. And sometimes I've built companies where, at the end of it, I wasn't sure how much better we really made things, and that just makes me want to try harder the next time to do something really good.

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I met with an investor to talk to him about starting this new company, and he asked me what I could have done better at Redfin. Half an hour later, I was still talking about all the things that I'd screwed up.

I assumed I blew it at the meeting, but he called me back and said, "Sounds like you've still got a lot to prove." And I do. I just want to see if I can do it better. If I were a great CEO, I'd be able to stop, but I'm only half good.

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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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