

LESSONS LEARNED OVER TWENTY YEARS

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The occasion of the 20th anniversary of the founding of Kaplan & Associates, Inc. this spring has made me think a great deal about leadership and talent. So, when a longtime client and friend asked the simple question “*what have you learned after all this time that would be helpful for my business?*”, the answers started flowing. After all, with twenty-seven years in the executive search business, and two decades now leading this firm, I have experienced quite a lot of human dynamics. Here are Ten Lessons Learned over the past twenty years. I hope you find them useful!

10. You never get a second chance to make a first impression. Early impressions occur across both sides of the table and can be overly impactful. While they are not and should not be the ultimate determiners of a hiring decision, it is important to be mindful of the dynamics of early impressions from all angles. Be sure to peer beyond first impressions and singular observations when looking to make a key hire.

9. Succession planning = planning for success. We never cease to be amazed at the lack of leadership succession in many of our client companies—despite speaking out on this subject since the early days of our firm. The continu-

ity of leadership promotes the continuity of strategy, which is usually beneficial for the business. Moreover, the lack of good succession management can cause issues in unexpected ways, and in the worst case can spell the end of a firm as an independent organization.

8. Good onboarding significantly reduces the risk of executive organ rejection. Do not underestimate the collateral impact of bringing a new senior executive into your organization. It’s just as important to help the team adjust to its’ new leader, as it is to help the hired executive adapt to the new organization. Such proactive onboarding, ideally in both directions, can make a significant difference in a new leader’s survival and long term success.

7. In an effort to give everyone a fair shot to succeed, clients are often slow to take action on a poor performer. This may sound self-serving coming from a recruiter, and does not mean that every weak contributor should be fired. However, history has shown that Boards and CEOs almost always know when a situation is not salvageable, and spend valuable time deliberating or delaying the inevitable. And

and a leader’s potential ability to adjust to change and constructively evolve will be the determiners of great executive performance going forward.

3. Culture is, as everyone knows, quite important; and all firms say that their culture is really unique. But when trying to determine culture fit within a company, dig deep to understand what culture truly means within that particular place and time. And, be mindful that the culture within a company’s boardroom is often a distinct subset of the overall organizational environment. A candid understanding of your culture provides context to evaluate executive fit in a much more meaningful way. You must be honest with yourself about culture, which is not always as easy as it sounds.

2. Talent truly matters. Differentiation thru strategy is hard, so more often differentiation is determined by a company’s relative performance—and the variable on performance always comes down to people. “A” players move the needle, and “B” players almost never do; and the cost savings by dropping from an A to a B player simply never equals the

Everything about

LEADERSHIP BEGINS WITH INTEGRITY

in business, time is never your ally.

6. Coaching is not an indication of weakness. Few great leaders become great without some outside support. Most top leaders have been coached at some point, many on an ongoing basis, and it can be a huge aid to success. Investing in your new leaders and highest potential players nearly always pays off. Good coaches are a privilege and valuable asset to be fully leveraged for the good of the executive and the company.

5. Communication skills are in fact a key aspect of successful leadership, but continue to be underdeveloped, especially in the up-and-coming generations. This is compounded by the broader array of channels through which we are required to communicate today. These skills must be honed, and it does not happen on its own. After all, in my twenty-seven years in the executive search arena, I’ve never had a client ask for a candidate with poor communication skills.

4. As they say, past performance is no guarantee of future results. Put another way, a track record of success is no longer sufficient to label someone a promising leader. It’s the combination of past experience and future potential that successful leaders must embody today. Adaptability and flexibility are new buzzwords with great relevance. The ability to synthesize and respond to disparate data from a wide array of sources over multiple channels is critical for leaders to succeed in today’s globally interconnected business climate. Competence is the minimum requirement,

difference that an A player’s enhanced performance generates over time. Real talent makes a difference.

1. Everything about leadership begins with integrity. Without trust, honesty, and ethics at the top, the authenticity of leadership becomes compromised, and a degradation of performance usually follows. A breach of integrity erodes individual and institutional credibility from the outset, and must be dealt with sooner rather than later, and the sooner the better. Boards and CEOs get to sit in those big chairs, and must sometimes make the tough call. Leaders are paid to, and expected, to lead from the front lines. The best CEOs and business leaders really do set the tone at the top in every way. It all begins and ends with integrity.

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