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How Would You Answer This? "Tell Me About A Wrong Decision You've Made."

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It's a telling job-interview question because many people often don't share a meaningful or revealing answer, says [Varda Shine](#), a veteran CEO and a colleague of mine at [Merryck & Co.](#), where we do senior leadership development and executive mentoring. In our conversation, she shared this and other smart insights on challenges like meeting overload and why leaders need to have the discipline to deal with poor performers on their teams.

Q. What themes come up most often with the senior executives you're advising?

A. A lot of the conversations are about people. We do a deep analysis of their team, looking at each person's contribution to achieving targets. Do their team's collective strengths support the overall strategy? Can the leader delegate completely or do they spend time checking the details?

Leaders find it difficult to dismiss people. There's an element, on the one hand, of concern about damaging someone's life, and on the other hand, there's an element of ego that makes them think they can coach people and help them do better.

The first time I had to let someone go changed me as a leader. It was a small office and I knew the guy needed a job. But as much as it pained me to do that, it was the best thing that could have happened to him. He ended up 'reinventing' himself and I learned to trust myself and my relationship with people to make sure that I do it the right way. You have to give people real, honest feedback. So I'm very open with people. I believe in telling people what you see, where things stand, explain your point of view and then look at the possibilities.

No one has a perfect team. It's always about how you deal with the bottom 10 percent. Do you admit seeing it? How quickly do you, as a leader, respond to problems? How openly do you speak about it? If you don't take action, it actually says much about your leadership because everyone around is seeing what is happening or not happening.

I'm not suggesting leaders should just get rid of people without proper analysis, but frequently people

are struggling because they're not in the right job for them, and helping them find an appropriate other role may lead to them doing quite well.

Q. What are other themes?

A. Meeting overload. A lot of CEOs are running from one meeting to another without the time to stop, digest and actually think quietly, or to seek people's opinions and listen. The culture in the UK is very polite, so a majority of direct reports wouldn't necessarily go to their boss and tell them what they really think. So we spend time on understanding what's important, how to get more input and the best ways to convey a message.

Q. And what are the best tactics?

A. We start by making sure that the point they want to raise is a valid and robust one. Second, I try to understand what stops them from saying things as they are. What experience did they have in the past that may constrain them, and it can be in this role, previous roles or any other example? We're dealing with people's fears and these questions help unearth some of them.

"No CEO likes people coming to them with problems without some potential answers."

Once they understand themselves better, the conversation will move to focusing on what they and their CEO are trying to achieve. What is the common goal? Have they come up with some possible solutions? No CEO likes people coming to them with problems without some potential answers, so think about potential solutions. A few options are always better as they may not see the full picture from their point of view.

Then we can role play and help with the conversation. It is always useful to state your intention at the beginning. You're not there to criticize. You're coming to help find a better solution, and you describe what you don't like about what's happening now. Then you offer up your alternative suggestions in the spirit of trying to make the CEO more successful.

Q. Through your clients, you get a lot of insights into different corporate cultures. What are the biggest challenges you see?

A. Many leaders spend too much time on operational issues, rather than focusing on strategic issues and doing occasional "deep dives" on operational matters. I worked with a CEO who was attending endless meetings, and he decided after we spoke to delegate some of the meetings to his direct reports, so he could focus more on strategy, stakeholders and external relations.

There's also a lot of bureaucracy, slow decision-making and risk aversion. The financial regulation commission in the UK keeps coming up with all sorts of new rules that are making companies cautious. So you end up with a lot of caveating to everything you do, and big decisions are very rare, as no one wants to rock the boat. If something worked before, they'll ask, why should we try something new? Companies are being pushed into more risk-averse behavior.

Q. What were your early influences? Were you in leadership roles early on?

A. Bringing people along and being the "responsible adult" was very much a childhood thing. I grew up in Israel and I remember in wars that I was always making sure everyone got to the bomb shelter. When I did my army service, I ended up leading a business unit at the age of 18, and the work included budgets, resource allocation, leadership and measuring results.

I was in the Air Force and there was a new air traffic control system that the Americans and the Israelis developed, and I was in charge of delivering the system for full use for the Air Force. I ran the business along with two other girls.

Q. Other important leadership lessons for you?

A. A big inflection point was when I took my entire executive team to a three-day off-site. We shared past experiences, admitted to our "limited perceptions" of each other and really created our shared values and ways of working, which were fantastic. From that point on, our meetings were about 30 to 50 percent more efficient, and shorter.

"Once people really focus on the meetings, we solve things in half the time."

One of our rules was that if any of us noticed that someone was switched off, let's stop the meeting, find out what the issue is, deal with it, and move on. Once people really focus on the meetings, we solve things in half the time. No one carried any baggage. It was much more fun working like this, as well.

Q. If you could only ask somebody one question in a job interview, and you'd have to decide whether to hire them based on their answer, what would the question be?

A. "Tell me about a wrong decision you've made. When did you realize it was the wrong decision and what did you do about it?"

I've asked this question for decades, of hundreds of people, and my own research shows that men don't make mistakes at work. Whenever I've asked them, they would often say, "I can't remember," or "I don't know." If they gave an examples of mistakes, a lot of time it was in their personal life. Women, on the other hand, were very quick to volunteer examples.

It's a good question because it allows me to see how connected they are to themselves, how honest they are, how they think, how they make decisions, and how they respond when they understand they've messed up. What do they do to fix it?

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