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The Everyday Leader

Balancing Leadership: The Power of Professional Partnerships

Leadership

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Introduction

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Starting something new is often exhilarating, but it can also be incredibly isolating. As a leader, you are the one everyone looks to for guidance, direction, and decisions. This pressure can create a sense of loneliness that is difficult to shake, especially when you are used to having a partner by your side. When my husband and I successfully exited the company we founded, he retired, and I embarked on a new journey to establish a practice at the company that acquired us. Although we are still together and he remains my sounding board, the nature of our conversations has changed. He is no longer in the trenches with me day-to-day and this has left me navigating unfamiliar waters.

Leadership often comes with a sense of isolation, especially in the early days of building something from scratch. I remember those first weeks vividly—every decision felt monumental, every step a potential turning point. Without my partner actively involved in the business, I felt the weight of responsibility more than ever. It was a lonely place to be, and I missed the balance his presence provided, both personally and professionally. Even though he was still there for me, it was different; the daily grind of the business world was now something I had to face largely on my own.

After exiting our company, I found myself navigating a new challenge: transitioning from being an owner to fitting into corporate life. This shift brought a significant change in dynamics—from being the ultimate decision-maker to reporting to someone else and, most dauntingly, managing a team of employees. While I excelled at negotiations, strategy, and project management, I quickly realized that people management was a different beast altogether.

Managing people is a skill set all its own, one that often does not come naturally to those who are used to focusing on strategy and results. In my previous ventures, I thrived on driving projects forward, making swift decisions, and negotiating deals. But managing a team within a corporate structure required a completely different approach. It was not just about giving directions or setting goals; it was about understanding the nuances of each individual, navigating office dynamics, and addressing conflicts—skills I had yet to develop.

Adapting to this new role was incredibly hard. The skills that made me successful as an owner did not necessarily translate to managing a team in a corporate environment, and I often felt out of my depth. It is one thing to love people and want the best for them, but quite another to manage challenging employees who can make life difficult for everyone else or just simply doing what's best for the team and therefore best for the company as a whole. It was a steep learning curve, and I realized I was not alone in finding this aspect of leadership particularly challenging. Many leaders thrive on the thrill of strategy and execution, only to find themselves struggling when it comes to the human side of management.

Reflecting on this experience, I have come to understand that managing people is both an art and a science. It requires patience, empathy, and a willingness to see things from others' perspectives—all while balancing the needs of the business. For those of us who thrive on action and results, learning to manage people effectively can feel like learning an entirely new profession.

It was during this tumultuous time that I reconnected with a colleague who would later become an unexpected yet invaluable partner in my professional life. Two years into my new role, I invited her for drinks over Christmas—a rare moment of reaching out amidst the whirlwind of my responsibilities. At that time, she was not my co-worker; in fact, she was at a crossroads in her

sciences, professional services, advanced manufacturing and agriculture industries. She also contributes to Forbes Business Council as a member and author of articles on site selection and incentives topics. Jenny is passionate about innovation, sustainability, and intercultural communication. She has completed studies in entrepreneurship, psychology, and crowdfunding at the Wharton School and HEC Paris, and has lived and worked in Japan for seven years and is classically trained as an archaeologist. She enjoys beekeeping, sailing and traveling in her spare time.

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own career. She was contemplating leaving a company where she was not particularly happy, and they, in turn, may not have been particularly happy with her. She was not actively looking for something new but was thoughtfully considering her next steps, wanting to find the right fit.

Over those drinks, we shared where we were in our careers and lives on an incredibly personal level. Neither of us were necessarily in the best places, navigating our own professional and personal challenges. But in that conversation, I sensed a potential opportunity for something more than just a professional acquaintance.

Over the next four months, we continued to meet regularly, each time peeling back more layers and discovering more common ground. As our connection deepened with each conversation, we were able to create an opportunity for her at the firm where I work. She joined the same practice but in a different, complementary service line. This arrangement has allowed us to work together strategically, refer clients to one another, share resources, and celebrate each other's wins. Despite our differences, we have found a rhythm that works, balancing each other in ways that are both unexpected and refreshing.

Our partnership is full of nuances that make it unique. While we approach things differently—she brings a steady, thoughtful perspective, and I tend to lean toward direct, decisive action—these differences have become our greatest strength. When I see an opportunity to move forward quickly, she thoughtfully considers the potential risks, ensuring we do not rush into anything unprepared. On the other hand, when she feels uncertain, I am there to offer encouragement and remind us of the benefits of taking a chance. This dynamic has allowed us to navigate complex projects with a balanced approach, resulting in decisions that are both bold and well-considered.

We have supported each other through various changes—in professional and private matters—and this support has strengthened our bond. Whether it is providing feedback on a challenging project or offering a listening ear during tough times, we have built a partnership that goes beyond the professional realm. It is a professional friendship that brings balance, support, and growth.

Transitioning from the separateness of leadership to finding a new partnership has been a transformative experience. It has taught me the value of having someone by your side who understands the weight of leadership and the complexities of our industry. My friend has become more than just a colleague; she has become a vital partner in navigating this new chapter of my career.

This new balance does not replace the one I had with my husband and business partner, but it offers something equally valuable—a professional counterpart who brings a different kind of balance and support. Together, we have created a dynamic partnership that makes the challenges of leadership a little easier and a lot more rewarding.

Conclusion

As I reflect on this journey, I am grateful for the partnerships that have helped me grow both personally and professionally. Finding balance in leadership is not always easy, but it is essential. Whether it is a spouse, a colleague, or a mentor, having someone who understands you and complements your strengths and weaknesses can make all the difference. I encourage everyone



to seek out these relationships, nurture them, and appreciate the unique balance they bring to our lives.

Closing Thought: In the words of Helen Keller, “Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.” This could not be truer in the realm of professional partnerships. Together, we find balance, support, and the strength to lead.

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