LEADING QUESTIONS
Challenges, Inspiration, and the Role of Reflection in Leadership
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The Puget Sound Business Journal recently held a dynamic and insightful Thought Leader Forum on the topic of executive leadership.

Participants were Jacki Fischer, Vice President Finance, Expedia, Inc.; Jim Dwyer, President and CEO, Expeditors International of Washington; Marilyn Gist, PhD., Associate Dean, Albers School of Business and Economics, Seattle University, and Aaron Howes, Vice President, Risk Management and Insurance, Expeditors International. Puget Sound Business Journal Publisher Emory Thomas led the discussion.

What is the biggest challenge facing leaders today?

Gist: Uncertainty is affecting a lot of people. Whether it’s in global markets, politics, the current administration’s shifting policies in many areas including immigration, sustainability and financial markets. We are facing questions about trust and integrity at a level we haven’t seen in a while.

Dwyer: There’s a lack of confidence in business right now. As the leader of a major insurer in Washington state, I can tell you that what I hear coming out of the administration with respect to the uninsured and the role of insurance is just plain false. I think that instills a lack of confidence in some business sectors.

How do you work with your managers to address this notion of confidence and shifting predictability? How do you advise them?

Dwyer: We use scenario planning. If this happens on one extreme, and this happens on the other, what are the options in the middle so we can pivot? Philosophically, on the other, what are the options in the situation? What do you advise them?

What is that attitude?

Howes: An entrepreneurial spirit, a will to succeed; drive, passion, someone who wants to learn and challenge their boundaries. Someone who’s committed.

Jacki, what is your filter for hiring?

Fischer: I’m looking for people who are honest and possess humility. If they don’t have that, we will not go on to the next level. These are traits you cannot teach.

Marilyn, how do you filter for humility?

Gist: I use situational questions. I ask people to describe situations they’ve been in and how they handled it. I try to get a read for how much they talk about themselves, how much they give credit to the team they worked with, whether they’re able to acknowledge if they’ve made a mistake and learned from it.

Jim, beyond humility, what are characteristics a successful leader needs in your organization?

Dwyer: We hope that they are very authentic and, if they’re an emerging leader, that there’s some risk tolerance. We say, “think big, start small and learn fast.” If you think big and start small and you fail, that’s ok, no problem with that – but you move on.

How do you identify leaders in your organizations?

Fischer: I think sometimes people naturally emerge as leaders, especially given the right environment where you can fail. Sometimes you see someone who naturally reaches out to include others even though they don’t have to. We seek people who naturally emerge and then we foster that leadership ability.

Howes: We have a lot of employees in different stages of their career development. Some want more responsibility. If they display the attributes we are looking for they will get that opportunity. Some people don’t want that opportunity. They’re happy to be a team player, and that’s fine, too.

Which is most important in your organization—mission, core values, or vision—and how is that practiced and communicated?

Fischer: We don’t have traditional core values. We have cultural norms. One of our cultural norms is “we lead humbly.” Another is “we believe in being different.” Another is “we believe in being transparent.” For example, we evaluated all our salaries, men vs women in the same role etc., and we shared the information with our employees.

Dwyer: I don’t know if they’re mutually exclusive. For us the vision is aspirational. I look at the mission as what we do, and our values is how we do it.

Howes: Our key performance indicators and our measurements are posted on our website monthly. The visibility employees have into the company’s strategy is better than ever now. We review it in department meetings and at the individual department level.

Marilyn, how does this pertain to Seattle University and your observations of leaders and their ability to lead?

Gist: The University walks its talk with respect to its mission statement which is about educating the whole person and developing leaders for a just and humane world. The vision should be aspirational and inspirational. The companies that come through our programs who have a very compelling sense of vision, coupled with some of the qualities of leadership we’ve been talking about, create cultures where everybody is giving 100% heart, mind and soul.

Dwyer: Part of our vision is that we leave no one behind. Many states are getting out of the Medicaid business and are putting it out to contract so we’re going through some very significant discussions internally right now.

What are the most important decisions you make as a leader in your organization?

Dwyer: They are around strategy and the direction of the company and then ensuring a lot of time is spent on those areas.

Fischer: Our most important decisions are about hiring and promoting people. We want people who believe in Expedia and what we do and have the passion. We try to look to our own people first and promote from within.

Howes: It always comes back to the people. Recruiting is one of the biggest challenges we face locally as the competition for talent is getting tougher and tougher.

Gist: My most important decisions are around strategy and people. You can have a company filled with great people and no direction or you can have great direction and have the wrong people. Leaders need to pay almost equal attention to those two things.

Who’s had a lot of impact on you as a leader, whether it’s a mentor, someone you’ve watched or invested in you?

Gist: My dad taught me to play chess when I was eight. I look back on that now and realize I was learning to think strategically and multiple steps ahead as a child. I had two other strong mentors – one in my early career with NASA and one when I was in my doctoral program. I have learned an incredible amount from the Jesuits at Seattle U. There’s a whole ethos about how you deal with people that was new to me and I wouldn’t trade it for anything.

Fischer: I also learned a lot from my father. He was a blue-collar worker for 30 years. He taught me that you could be a leader without being the “designated” leader and that sometimes the designated leader is not a very good leader. He also taught me to respect others and to understand that you cannot impose your views on someone else.

Dwyer: My parents. My father was a farmer in Nebraska who went on to teach at a great university. My mother didn’t go past high school but she was unbelievably smart. My older brother. And the Jesuits – they had a significant impact on me.

Tell me two lessons you learned from the Jesuits.

Gist: Primarily that the dignity of every person is key. The way the university recognizes that, and the care of the individual and the ethics that are part of it are huge lessons.

Dwyer: For me it’s the dignity of the person, the relentless focus on the marginalized and then critical thinking. You can’t get out of Seattle U without having developed critical thinking skills.

“You can’t fundamentally change who people are, but you can give them experiences and force reflection that get them to refine their understanding of the implications of their actions.”

Marilyn Gist, PhD.
Seattle University
What are the keys to developing the next generation of leaders in your world?

Fischer: We must teach those coming up that it’s about passion and that it’s ok if someone’s passion doesn’t match theirs. The world needs all types of people and we have a responsibility to teach new leaders to be accepting of everyone.

Dwyer: It’s about coaching, listening and letting them experiment and try. There’s no substitute for experience and having to hit your head against the wall and stubbing your toe along the way.

Gist: As you move into leadership it’s critical to learn that it’s not just about what you say and do. Who you are is as important. What are the qualities you bring? Are you transparent, honest, humble? What are your values? You can’t fundamentally change who people are, but you can give them experiences and force reflection that get them to refine their understanding of the implications of their actions. I heard a great quote at a conference last week: “Experience plus reflection is formative. Experience without reflection is just an event.”

Howes: I’m a graduate of Seattle U’s Executive Leadership Program (ELP) and it really helped me with this (reflection). We had to write a paper on a leadership failure and also had to develop and write a leadership plan. I found that a big transformation in myself was seeing how other people and companies would lead and then being challenged to put your plan on paper and hold yourself accountable to it.

Dwyer: I agree with that. We’ve had a number of leaders in our company go through the same program (ELP) and it is extraordinary for helping people to establish a practice of reflection. Every one of our employees who have graduated from the ELP says it’s life changing.

Howes: If you don’t write them down, you’re not going to know where you started and from what point you should measure progress and success.

Fischer: And you have to recognize and remember you’re not going to be great every day. You’re going to make mistakes and it’s how you handle the mistakes that really matter.

Gist: I’m good at creating goals and holding them lightly in my head. From the day Jim Dwyer said Seattle U should be the go-to place for leadership formation in the Puget Sound area, I never forgot it. I hope I didn’t write it down, but it became the goalpost against which I evaluated lots of different opportunities.

Howes: When I retire, I’d like to leave my department and hopefully Expeditors in a better position than when I arrived. I hope I’m remembered as a person who left it in a great place so that whoever follows can lead the next generation of employees. Hopefully I’ve hired and retained the right people and made smart decisions along the way.

Fischer: As a genuinely humble person who believed in and sought excellence. I want to be remembered as a person who saw potential in others and gave them opportunities to realize that potential.

Dwyer: All the metrics speak for themselves. Growth, profitability, and so on. But at the end of the day, I hope I’ve left a much stronger culture of people who are dedicated, hardworking, empathetic, and love what they do. The other stuff will take care of itself.

Gist: I hope to be remembered as a visionary builder who had a positive and somewhat profound impact on the hundreds of people who’ve come through the Executive Leadership programs at Seattle U.

THOUGHT LEADERS

Jacki Fischer is VP, Finance for Expedia’s Global Partner Solutions business and has been with Expedia for 11 years. Having lived abroad serving customers across diverse geographic regions throughout her career, Jacki brings different perspectives to the business. Her career spans over 20 years in Internal Audit, Big 4, and a variety of Finance/Accounting roles. She is a CPA, holds an MBA from Seattle University and an undergraduate degree in Accounting from Central Washington University.

JIM DWYER
President and CEO
Delta Dental of Washington

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AARON HOWES
Vice President, Risk Management and Insurance, Expeditors International

Dr. Marilyn Gist has more than 25 years’ experience in the field of executive development. She is a Professor of Management and Associate Dean for Executive Programs at Seattle University, and serves as Executive Director of SU’s Center for Leadership Formation. Previously, Marilyn held the Boeing Endowed Professorship of Business Management at UW and served as the Faculty Director for Executive MBA programs. Outside of her academic roles, she has served in management positions in the public and private sectors, and has extensive consulting experience.

Marilyn Gist, PhD.
Associate Dean, Albers School of Business and Economics, Seattle University

Aaron Howes, Vice President – Risk Management and Insurance, joined Expeditors in 1995 focusing on Logistics. In 2001, Mr. Howes joined the Risk Management department and is currently concentrating on the management and expansion of Expeditors Cargo Insurance Brokers, Inc. (ECIB). Mr. Howes is a licensed insurance broker who graduated from Queen’s University at Kingston with a degree in Economics. He is also a 2011 graduate of the Executive Leadership Program at Seattle University.

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Contact Marijane C. Milton:
206-876-5447 or mmilton@bizjournals.com