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CORNER OFFICE

You Want Insights? Go to the Front Lines

This interview with Brian Dunn, the chief executive of [Best Buy](#), was conducted and condensed by Adam Bryant.

Q. Tell me about some of the leadership lessons you've learned.

A. I didn't realize it at the time, but the first deep leadership lesson I learned was when I was 14 years old and working in a grocery store. The manager at the time, a gentleman named Ken, came up to me and said, "What do you think about this process we're using here in the front end to tell people to pick up their groceries?" A seemingly simple challenge, and I gave him some sort of innocuous, nonspecific answer — sort of, "Everything's fine."

And he pulled me aside and he said, "Now listen, I asked you about this 'cause I really care what you think. You're doing this every single day and I want to know what you think about it."

I know it seems simple, but just that notion of learning from people who are actually doing the work, and the encouragement he gave me to tell him exactly what I thought really stayed with me, and it was a recurring thing throughout the time I worked for him.

Q. What else?

A. Be really careful about what you believe about yourself. You're never as good as they say or as bad as they say. When I was made C.E.O. on June 24, I didn't wake up that morning smarter. I didn't wake up with a massive I.Q. expansion. I did wake up with a new responsibility.

Another piece that I think is really, really important is you have to be curious. I describe it as active learning. And one of the things I do is set out across our enterprise and look for ideas,

people doing things in ways that are different, doing things that are important for our future. And it's not just inside our enterprise; it's outside the enterprise, as well.

One of the things that became pretty clear to me, in my last role as president and chief operating officer at Best Buy, is that people don't line up outside my door to tell me how they've screwed something up. You know, you sort of get the "Yep, everything's going terrific and it's A-O.K."

So it's really important to me to get out where the customer experiences the brand, and that means I surf our Web pages. It means I call our call center. It means I visit our stores and talk to our associates about what's working, what's not.

Q. How would you say your leadership style has evolved over time?

A. I'll give you a very personal story about this. My wife just had her seven-year anniversary, all clear, from breast cancer. We had a big scare seven years ago. And in that moment, you get this gift of utter clarity — that the most important thing in the whole world was making sure my wife and my three children got through this.

It changed me as a leader. I got really focused on: What are the big rocks that we need to move? I still can fall into some of the petty traps, but I worked really hard to say, is this really important or is this just like a little ego thing for me?

Q. Tell me about the best bosses you've worked for.

A. Let me tell you a quick story that I think will illustrate it the best.

My first day at Best Buy in 1985, I got handed a sales book and I got sent out on the floor, and essentially that was the training. And the store manager came up to me a couple days later and said, "How do you like it here?" And I said: "You know what? I hate it. There's no training. I've got people grabbing at me."

And then he looked at me and he started talking to me about the Minnesota Twins — this was in Minnesota. Started talking to me about the Vikings, talking to me about my fiancée, and then talked to me about fishing. He started to get to know me and then he said: "You know, I come in early on Saturdays. If you want to spend some time, I'll teach you a little bit about how to sell." He did that for three successive Saturdays, and by the end of the three weeks, I was really pretty good and I liked it.

He taught me how to sell, and you can feed yourself for a lifetime when you know how to sell. And what he really did was start to open doors for me, and start to find things out in me that I didn't understand about myself.

Q. How do you use technology to keep in touch with employees and customers?

A. I leverage video to reach our folks. We have a quarterly enterprise-wide town hall that we started last year that is really an interesting couple of hours. We have folks from China, London, Mexico — all our operations around the world — and I typically start that off with, “Here’s a 15-minute update on where we are” and then we get questions from around the world. The other thing I will do is go on [Twitter](#) and listen to what people are saying about us.

I also have a program that searches the Internet anytime somebody mentions Best Buy out there. Sometimes it’s really great things, sometimes it’s obscenity-laden, but I have a huge appetite for it. If I see customers have problems with things, I will contact the appropriate person in our company and have them contact that customer. Sometimes I contact the customer.

Q. Hearing from you probably scares the heck out of them.

A. It does freak them out a little bit. But I do think that the social media we have out there create interesting platforms for people to make those connections. I think it’s just fascinating.

Q. What goals have you set for yourself as a leader and a manager?

A. I’ve set a couple. One, I have spent my career working in the United States, and I am going to be spending a lot of time visiting our operations in China and Europe and around the globe to get very connected to those businesses. Personally, I want to make sure I keep learning. I think the C.E.O. job is designed to insulate people from things that really happen. I want to make sure that I’m sort of out there in the white noise and the messiness of it all. If you don’t, you run the risk of becoming insulated and ineffective.

Q. You said the job is set up to insulate the C.E.O. What do you mean?

A. Most people don’t run in and tell you, “Hey, we’ve got a problem here,” or “I think I messed this thing up.” It’s human nature; everybody wants to look good. Everybody wants the optics to all line up. I think that the truth of the matter is that if you’re really going to look at it with clear eyes, there are things we do really well. There are things we’re O.K. at.

There are things that we're not great at. I think I've got a classic bell curve. I think 20 percent of my stores are great, 60 percent are good, and I've got 20 percent where I've got some serious work to do.

Q. Let's talk about hiring. Walk me through what you're looking for in the interview process, your key questions.

A. By the time these individuals get to me, we've had a thorough sort of scan of their technical capabilities and all that. So my discussion with them is very little about technical capability and competence and very much about cultural fit. And the thing I really focus in on is: "What are you passionate about? What do you really care about and what do you do with that?" And I don't care if it's coaching a basketball team or something else. I want to understand how they think about their passion.

Q. What are you listening for?

A. I want to know what you've done with it and how you feel and what you think about and what's the impact you've had with people.

Q. Talk about how you run meetings.

A. I lose interest quickly with the endless pontification. I like to use this phrase: "We have an 'apostle of the obvious' moment going on here." That drives me crazy. For the most part, I view meetings as a necessary evil, although I do enjoy our staff meetings when we get together and talk about where the business is and where we're going. I like those elements. But the endless meeting can get a little tedious for me, so I tend to want to get to the point.

Q. What big-picture advice do you give your kids about work?

A. Listen carefully, and when you're asked what you think, tell people what you think. And even if you end up on the short end of an interaction, I think you're better off in the long run for finding that voice and putting it forward.

Q. Are you a gadget person?

A. I'm a gadget freak. I love my gadgets and I've got to tell you why. Many pundits will write that we need to go back into a quieter and simpler time and the technology is separating us. I think that actually the technology brings us together, if we use it right. We can become prisoners to it if we don't.

I want to give you a real-life example. My sons are big basketball freaks. My wife, too. So I'm in London and I can't sleep. It's 4 in the morning, so I go on [NBA.com](#) and I'm watching the Lakers and Utah game. And all of a sudden my little [Skype](#) video chirps, and it's my three sons on their computer talking to me and they're whispering.

I said, "Why are you guys whispering?" And it's about 11 at night back home. They said, "'cause Mom will kick our ass if she knows that we're up." And so I said: "Well if she walks in the room, click me off, man. Don't let her know I'm part of it." But I'm sitting there watching the game with the boys and the only thing I can't do is put my arm around them. I'm on the road 100 days a year, so those moments are really important.

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