3 Lessons in Embracing Discomfort From a First-Time CEO



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Confession: As a first time CEO, I'm uncomfortable — a lot. At 26 years old, my experience isn't yet very broad and if I'm being honest, leading a category-defining organization where the board and executive team average a decade or two older than me, can feel awkward.

And I'm okay with that.

In fact, embracing the discomfort that comes with being a young leader and knowing my perspective is limited has become

my secret weapon.

Discomfort is a key indicator of high growth

We're a startup, carving out a new niche in a half-century-old retail space. As such, we need to take risks and be willing to break tradition. Challenging the status quo requires working through uncertainty which can cause stress, but it can also change both an individual and an organization for the better. Psychologists have given a name to this concept — post traumatic growth — a term that describes the self-improvement one undergoes after experiencing life challenges. While operating out of your comfort zone can feel overwhelming, with the right mindset it also sets the stage for growth.

One of the best ways I've learned to lean into discomfort is to recognize and celebrate when we're entering into uncharted territory. From large endeavors like moving to an offshore manufacturer to daily stretch goals, I make it a point to recognize when a team or individual is stepping out of their comfort zone with a greater goal in mind. By celebrating the courage it takes to enter into new terrain, we also allow room for mistakes to be made along the way.

Too often we try to cover our mistakes when they happen or avoid them all together, particularly in the workplace. By doing so, we lose critical opportunities for growth and learning. When we normalize mistakes and celebrate the process of learning from them, we create an environment of psychological safety, which has been proven to accelerate innovation, unlock the benefits of diversity and help organizations better adapt to change.

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Practicing vulnerability builds employee trust

I make a lot of mistakes. When I do, I like to share my lived experience and the lessons learned openly with my team. Exposing that you're imperfect may feel like a weakness, particularly when you're a young leader like me, but getting it wrong can be one of the best ways to humanize yourself and build trust with your employees.

When you show vulnerability as a leader, you send a message that you value honest feedback and give license to your team to offer it and do the same. It also helps shift the focus off the mistake itself, and on to what happens after – offering more opportunity to build up critical thinking and resilience.

Open conversation around roadblocks and opportunities leads to stronger performance and greater results and this can only be achieved with trust. It's why employees in high-trust organizations collaborate better, stay longer and have more energy at work.

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Communal knowledge yields better results

Speaking of energy, my mother used to remind me not to be the loudest person at the party, because well, quite often, I was. It's fair to say I've never had a problem sharing my opinions, but as a leader I've learned to strategically hold back at times. Our instincts are to talk first, sell strong and be heard. If you're an opinionated leader who holds rank power, however, the moment you speak, it changes how others think about a problem. It's why so many CEOs and high-ranking

executives end up surrounded by “yes people.” They position themselves as the one that has more knowledge, and as such their supporting team doesn’t challenge or even contribute alternate ideas that could lead to better results.

Yes, there’s merit to hierarchies when it comes to decision making, but I also believe in hiring people more talented than myself in their own areas. Let’s be honest, at 26 years old, I’d be foolish to think that I always know better than my colleague with 26 years of experience. As a young leader, one of the most valuable skills I’ve developed is the ability to facilitate powerful conversations that leverage the communal knowledge of our team. In shifting my communication from entering with a strong opinion, quite often I leave conversations having not contributed much content, but feeling as though nothing was left unsaid.

Part of that speaks to the incredible people we’ve hired, but it also speaks to embracing a culture of discomfort — where opinions that don’t mirror your own are valued and given a platform to be heard.

The pandemic and compounding social movements have taught us the importance of challenging our own beliefs and seeking out diverse perspectives. It also reminded us that sometimes we have no choice but to step out of our comfort zone and be okay with being out of our depth. Embracing discomfort can be a powerful tool for adaptation and growth — one that challenges your employees to level up individually and collectively. Take it from me or maybe don’t — after all, I am just a first-time CEO.

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