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FOSTERING GROWTH AND BELONGING: INSIGHTS FROM HARRY HUTSON'S JOURNEY AS AN EXECUTIVE COACH AND CONSULTANT

Harry Hutson is a leadership coach and organizational consultant dedicated to helping individuals overcome obstacles—many of which are self-imposed—to achieve their personal and professional goals. With over two decades of experience as a coach, and two decades as a for-profit executive and nonprofit board member, Harry offers empathy and understanding as well as advice and counsel to a wide range of clients.

Resilience and Self-awareness in Leaders

Harry believes that resilience is crucial, and it requires self-awareness. In his coaching practice, Harry encourages leaders to appreciate their strengths, mitigate their weaknesses, and become more adaptable to change. The most important factor in his coaching is trust, rooted in confidentiality and care. Harry says, “For me, the ultimate benchmark is when clients have achieved what they want, and we have become friends.”

Significant Leadership Challenges

In his book co-authored with Martha Johnson, *“Navigating an Organizational Crisis: When Leadership Matters Most,”* Harry analyzes the role of leadership during sudden emergencies and challenging periods. For example, divisiveness, loneliness, and disconnection are widespread. When individuals do not feel they belong, they are likely to underperform, become disruptive, or leave the organization. Leaders play crucial roles in fostering a sense of belonging through their interactions with individuals, within teams, and in the broader organizational culture.

Everyday Methods for Creating Belonging

Harry’s client organizations are approaching office work in different ways. Some have returned to the office after the pandemic, others have stayed remote, and some have adopted a hybrid model. Regardless of where a team is located, members benefit from being appreciated by their colleagues. Harry believes anyone can help others feel they belong, and that permission is not required. Here are three simple techniques: 1) intentionally repeated actions such as beginning each meeting with a virtual handshake or greeting can become rituals of team identity; 2) sharing individual purposes to create a statement of collective purpose can help everyone feel on board; 3) telling personal stories in team meetings can build understanding and empathy.

Leadership Development Programs that Work

Harry understands what does not work well: approaches that overlook how adults learn or that adopt a one-size-fits-all approach. What does work? Programs that are based on real-world interactions between colleagues and that build skills while achieving meaningful results. “Infotainment” is out, as is “mandatory” fun. Instead, designs should include action-reflection-learning, feedback and practice, mentoring and coaching, simulation, role-play, and teaching by leaders.

Differences in Leadership Challenges: Start-ups vs. MNCs

On his first day at a dot-com start-up as head of human resources, Harry took on administrative tasks such as

writing offer letters. In his first six months as the head of learning and development at an established multinational corporation, Harry was involved in an extensive onboarding process.

Now, as a coach, he sees start-up leaders as “pirates,” opportunistic, hands-on voyagers searching for treasure. In contrast, Harry views MNC leaders as “admirals” navigating with experienced colleagues, sailing with cultural momentum. He recommends start-ups and MNCs learn from each other. Entrepreneurial firms can gain valuable insights from tried-and-true practices found elsewhere, while established companies can benefit from the innovations and risk-taking of new players.

Leadership Qualities Driven by AI and Automation

There is a notable gap between the potential value of AI and what is currently being achieved. As information technologies and their related skills continue to evolve, leaders must incorporate organizational readiness to merge AI into their strategic plans. A key cultural dimension is continuous learning championed by leaders who are good learners themselves. These leaders should be curious, humble, socially astute, and quick to try promising new ideas.

Digital Tools Fostering Trust and Transparency

Effective feedback, or, as Harry prefers to call it, feedforward, requires more than survey forms and statistical comparisons. Stakeholder interviews performed by coaches who may also be able to observe leadership behavior provide context for digital tools to be effective; video platforms can be enablers.

Critical Leadership Skills for Addressing Complex Global Challenges

Harry believes that engaging stakeholders in meaningful dialogue fosters curiosity and respect, dignity and psychological safety—necessary elements in organizational life everywhere. Hope has emerged as a dynamic force. Hope demands being truthful about reality while working

positively, in concert with others, to achieve beneficial outcomes. (*Refer to Hutson and Perry’s Putting Hope to Work: Five Principles to Activate Your Organization’s Most Powerful Resource.*)

What’s Next for Leaders and Leadership

Leadership is inherently personal, and it requires self-awareness and authenticity. Leaders need to understand their origins—inheritations from the past and the impacts of their own lived experience. But leaders must stay grounded in the here-and-now, even while thinking ahead. Consider that the average person has about four thousand weeks to live. That awareness alone can engender both immediacy and perspective. In Harry’s opinion, new skills, techniques, or forms of intelligence, though necessary, are insufficient. A deeply reflective and balanced viewpoint that includes self-compassion, which is an outcome of good coaching, is the ideal: *Know yourself.*

