The So What from BCG Podcast

Why CEOs Should Embrace Generous Leadership

Joe Davis

GEORGIE FROST: We’re undoubtedly living in tough times. War and climate change sit alongside economic and labor concerns closer to home. There’s a cliché that tough times call for tough leaders, but in the post-pandemic world are the old rules of what it means to be a tough leader being rewritten? What do CEOs and other leaders need to do to instill confidence, inspire their people, and affect change?

I’m Georgie Frost and this is The So What from BCG.

JOE DAVIS: People have popularized head, heart, and hand of leadership. And for many years we celebrated the head part: Do you have great strategy? Do you have great vision? And the hand: Did you get it done? I’m sure there were leaders who put the heart in the center there and used it, they just didn’t get celebrated as much. I think today people are looking for that combination of all three.

GEORGIE FROST: Today I am talking to Joe Davis, former chair for BCG North America and author of The Generous Leader: 7 Ways to Give of Yourself for Everyone’s Gain.

JOE DAVIS: I do believe that now is a time for a generous leader. And a generous leader is actually, is somebody who gives of themselves without expectation of personal benefit so others can grow, develop, and thrive to their full potential. I think, of course, a leader has to worry about all the stakeholders, the shareholders, the investors, the customers and clients, because if you aren’t worried about them, you’re not going to have any revenue generated for the shareholders, the employees and your people are very critical, because they’re the one helping you deliver, and the community at large, I still argue. But if you’re going to think about all those groups in arguably challenging times, which we have so many of them all at once, yeah, you’ve got to be tough. You have to make decisions and you can’t afford to be indecisive. If you think you’re wrong or if you discover you’re wrong, you change it. You’ve got to stand up for all those stakeholders. You do have to be empathetic. This is just something that so many leaders say and the young people say, is being demanded of people today. I was talking to Fran Katsoudas, who’s the executive vice president and chief people policy and purpose officer at Cisco, Cisco the tech company in Silicon Valley, and she told a story from her earlier leadership days or business days. She said a leader pulled her aside and said, "Fran, you don’t have enough killer instinct. I’m telling you, do not care so much. You’ll do well to put some of that away." And she said to me, she goes, "I didn’t follow that advice, because it wasn’t authentic to me." She said, "Now, interestingly, it didn’t work out so well for that leader either," and she doesn’t believe it works out at all for today’s leader. So she said, "I will make tough decisions. I will engage in very intense issues. I will push people to move hard, but I will always strive to do it with respect and caring." So I don’t know Fran personally, deeply, but I bet you she’s a combination of a generous leader and a "tough" leader.

GEORGIE FROST: Is this a question of your two types of leader or is this just a redefinition of the concept of tough?

JOE DAVIS: I think it’s not two types of leader. I don’t think that’ll work. I think it’s redefinition of tough. I mean, people have popularized head, heart, and hand of leadership. And for many years we celebrated the head part: Do you have great strategy? Do you have great vision? And the hand: Did you get it done? I’m sure there were leaders who put the heart in the center there and used it, they just didn’t get celebrated as much. I think
today people are looking for that combination of all three. And there's toughness in there and there's caring or generosity in there.

GEORGIE FROST: I think what you’re saying is absolutely right. I think the concept of what it means to be tough nowadays is different. And I’m wondering, in all your experience, leaders are just reflecting almost societal expectations and I think particularly when it comes to men, the idea of in the olden days, a tough leader is one that sucks it up, isn't vulnerable. And actually we require much more of everybody and our leaders. So it’s a societal reflection, perhaps?

JOE DAVIS: Yeah. Oh, I think so. You could say easily that the Millennials or the Gen Zers are defining this change, maybe they are, but I think people who work in organizations, the days... no offense, to the white shirt and the blue suit and everyone wore the same blue tie... I guess, and you’re just a cog in the organization wheel... those days just don’t work anymore.

People really want to be seen as a human and as someone who’s contributing meaningfully to the organization, not just a cog in the wheel. And if they expect that, then all of a sudden... You can have a tough leader who makes tough calls because you need to, they want that too. They're looking for the leader to live some of the values that you just mentioned.

GEORGIE FROST: That seems a lot on leaders, the expectations now. In your book, you asked the question right at the start, why me? As in, why are you writing this book? What do you have to offer to someone reading a book about generous leaders? Why were you writing about it? Why were you writing about it now, and what did you learn?

JOE DAVIS: That's a tough question actually. So why did I write it? I wrote it for several reasons. One coming out of COVID and the leadership of North America at that time, I had a number of colleagues who pushed me hard, said, you should write about your experience there, that experience leading, et cetera.

I created, when I was 15 years old, a list of life’s goals. It was actually an interesting list by itself. On there was get something published. I left it vague like that because I published an article, so therefore I qualified it. But I thought, okay, and I’d lost that list for like 40 years. I found that. I said, oh, this is interesting. Okay.

GEORGIE FROST: How many did you do?

JOE DAVIS: Oh, it sounds arrogant, but they’re all checked. They’re all checked.

GEORGIE FROST: Oh, nice.

JOE DAVIS: Actually, Georgie, I said to a coach of mine, what am I going to do now?

GEORGIE FROST: Write a new list.

JOE DAVIS: The person said, make another list. I said, oh, of course. I didn’t think of that. I thought I was done. Then the other thing though is, it’s across whether it be Procter and Gamble in my early days, actually, I used to be a restaurant manager and all through BCG, and I admit as consultants who work hard, but they’re also consultants and talented young people who are very demanding, at least in North America, believe it or not, 69% of the staff when I ran North America were under 29 years old. So talking about having to connect with that generation.

So I think there was a number of experiences there worth telling a story about. The experience was interesting. I mean, I had a coach, she’d say, okay, well why did you do that? I say, I don’t know. That’s what I do. She goes, you can’t write a book and say, that’s what I’d do. You have to look into yourself, Joe, and what did you learn over the years? Why’d you do that? Why were you afraid to do it? What were the challenges?

Which was an incredible experience just to pull it out of my own head, of course, we’ll see when people read the book. Hopefully it does help some people expand their leadership beyond just the strategy, vision, which is not just they’re not very critical, setting metrics and all that, and actually
brining generous leadership or the heart into the picture also.

**GEORGIE FROST:** So much of what you’ve done sounds intuitive, instinctive. If it’s so innate, how can you write it down into a way that we can learn from it? Or, was it experience that taught you that? Because the way you describe a leader nowadays, a lot of it comes down to well, personality and can you teach that?

**JOE DAVIS:** So I think all of us can find these places of this type of leadership, whatever it might be, and say, okay, how do I develop, flesh those out more? One of the things I mentioned is really a generous listener or really listen to learn. Hear people from another’s perspective, understand where they’re coming from and strive to learn what they know that you don’t know.

Every single CEO that I interviewed said that was critical, and they all liked to ask questions. We can all believe for many years, oh, I’ve got the analysis. I’ve been there before. I know it. But actually there’s other people that might know something you don’t know.

You say, how can I write it down? I mean, I had to explore how did I develop that. But I think if you realize, okay, I really got to make sure I listen to learn, you can start that at 28 or 30 or 32 or 24 and/or as a CEO, who probably is doing it pretty well. But maybe you want to spend even more time speaking within broader setting of organization to understand really where they stand.

**GEORGIE FROST:** Don’t stay in your own head. Explain a little bit more about how that’s possible because we all have a perspective and a bias. How do you make sure that you don’t do that and you constantly listen? Asking is better than telling.

**JOE DAVIS:** Yeah, I guess you just can’t be arrogant for starters and believe you have all the answers. But I’ll tell you, I had a mentor at BCG. He’s always pushed me and all of us—engage the skeptics, uncover the no’s. And if you believe people are saying no, are saying it just because they want to cause trouble and get in the way, well, okay, then you’re in trouble.

But the fact is most people are saying no because there’s something they know about why whatever it is can’t get done that you don’t know. The minute you know that, you can go solve it with them or solve it... But you can go solve it if you really want to get to the best answer, have a few mistakes, maybe that’s what it is, Georgie, and when you make that mistake, you say, oh gosh, next time I better be asking more questions.

**GEORGIE FROST:** Do you learn more from the mistakes or the successes, Joe?

**JOE DAVIS:** The mistakes. The mistakes or the direct and sometimes painful but very clear feedback, I would say.

**GEORGIE FROST:** Feedback’s absolutely essential, isn’t it? But how do you foster an environment, especially as a leader, where people who are in positions beneath you feel confident that they can say something or even positions alongside you.

**JOE DAVIS:** One thing you can do is put in mechanisms in place to create peer feedback upwards, feedback and all that, that you could do it at the corporate level or whatever it might be. But I think more importantly is actually to role model collecting feedback. If you finish a presentation or a meeting with a group of people, with the clients or whatever, when you walk out of the room, ask the team, okay, how did we do? How did I do?

Now, of course, probably no one’s going to tell you, but even the fact you asked. And then critique yourself a bit, but the fact that you ask at least sends a signal. So I do think it’s the same thing is if you role model asking for support and feedback, you’re going to open it up.

**GEORGIE FROST:** You mentioned authenticity. What does it mean to be authentic as a leader?
JOE DAVIS: Well, I think it means bringing you, the you, to everything you do. And it used to be you left the personal side of you at home and you only had the work side of you at work. And your comment at the very beginning about what expectations are of all those that we work with, people are looking for the whole person to be there, someone to engage with them, understand where somebody else is coming from, share a little bit of their own vulnerabilities. I think vulnerability is important to becoming authentic too. You don’t have to tell every problem you have, but in the work environment...

I had a good friend who told me a story. I said, well, how did you think about being more vulnerable? And he said, well, it was very difficult for me. He said, actually, I would never admit I didn’t know something. And he said, if I was with a team working on something and I could tell they were stuck and they were going to ask me what I thought, I might walk out of the room before I have to get faced with saying I don’t know. Talk about a waste of time, but the person was quite afraid. And he said, one time I just said, what the heck? And he said, I don’t know either. And it was amazing. He said, the whole room was like, oh, you don’t know. Oh, well, since none of us know, let’s really talk about what it might... It’s like a breath of fresh air went through. Everyone got energized because everyone’s afraid to show too much they didn’t know.

So I think authenticity also means sharing some of your own vulnerabilities, which can be as simple as, I’m sorry, I don’t get it either, let’s all work on it together.

GEORGIE FROST: When did that particular penny drop for you, Joe?

JOE DAVIS: Well, that one’s a personal story. I have three quick personal stories. One was my wedding. I couldn’t get through my vows. I cried through my entire vows. My wife was clear and strong, and the minister had to say six words and I’d repeat them, then six words and I’d repeat them, choking the entire time. I was 23 years old. I was so embarrassed.

After that, I don’t know how many people came up to me and said, “Oh my gosh, that was so wonderful. So much love in the room. So thankful you were willing to be yourself.” Well, here I was 23-year-old male thinking I blew it, and yet I got all this feedback. That was a real opener for me. I didn’t think about it then, but as I think over the years.

Another experience, my mom died when I was 30 and my two brothers and I were going to speak at the service. Well, guess what? This time I sobbed, I could not get anything out. And that case, the priest at the service said, “Joe, tears are the fountains of love.” Which obviously again, similar to ten years earlier, was a very powerful signal to me that being willing to let your vulnerabilities yourself show, you may think, oh my God, this is going to hurt, this’ll be bad, whatever. I had early signals.

Then I’ll tell you a business one. I was speaking at the ELC, which is elite set of Black CEOs and leaders, and I was asked to come and talk about my journey focused on DE&I and these issues. Well, I was nervous, and this was only like seven, ten years ago. I was nervous. I had paper and I dropped my papers all over the floor. And I picked up the papers, they were a mess. I made it through.

But I tell you, once that happened, I kind of stopped and was myself. And then again, believe it or not, all these people came, “Geez Joe, that was so great. Just to see your authenticity, your vulnerability, it just means so much to us.” Thirty years later, it was still reinforced. I made a mistake that most people would be embarrassed as heck of and actually the feedback was a thank you for being yourself and being real.

GEORGIE FROST: For some people listening, moved by your stories, Joe, but they would think, I just couldn’t do that. To even say, I don’t know. I’m frightened by what’s going on. I’m worried about the business or my personal life. This doesn’t come that easily to a lot of people, particularly in a work context where, as you mentioned earlier, we’ve been encouraged not to bring our personal lives into the office.
JOE DAVIS: Yeah, although I think whether it’s the pandemic or time, but that’s starting to shift because our personal lives became the office, right? I hear you. I got to say a couple things. I think it’s so powerful if you can share some vulnerabilities, it enables your teams to share a few, and if they’re stuck, they’re not afraid to figure out how to get unstuck. So I think it’s important to try to find your moments.

If you remember, Arne Sorenson, the CEO of Marriott, that video of him when he was, also, they had to let their staff go and of course he was fighting cancer at the time, so he got on that video with his no hair from chemo, and it was very powerful.

Christina Sistrunk, who was CEO of an energy company, said to me, “I just always would watch others who might be a little more honest or say something, watch how they did it. I can’t do what they did, but how did they get through it and what was the reaction?” And that helped her to say, “Okay, I’m going to try to be more open and authentic with people, which is arguably even trickier if you’re a woman and she was in the oil industry, this is...yeah, right. Your reaction said it all. I don’t say anything any more, your reaction said it.

GEORGIE FROST: You mentioned a lot about your mentor and how important is it to have a mentor, but also who else did you look up to? You said you look at leaders that inspire you. Who inspired you?

JOE DAVIS: Well, so this mentor, he was my mentor for 30 years or 25 years, was very inspirational. He was very tough, but I could tell he cared about my development. So the tough comments were only to help me to get better. So he inspired me.

Now, I get personal a lot, I’ll tell you two other people. My father-in-law was the president of Northwest Paper and then a senior executive of Potlatch Paper. He was so in tune...he’s passed away now, so he was in those roles 25 years ago and then 30 years before that, so definitely in the other time.

He was so in tune with the teams, the people. He’s one of these that would know everybody on the shop floor’s name, everyone that just worked, wherever, in the office. Say hello, ask a question about them. And of course, I didn’t see that in the office, but I saw that translating the stories he told and how he lived. That was very inspirational for me, just observing that.

And then I’ve got to tell you, since you asked, my wife. My wife is one of those who only cares about other people. Matter of fact, sometimes we say you need to care about yourself a little bit more. She really spends the time to think about, remember what others tell her, where are they coming from. It’s all instinct for her. It’s probably innate, even. Still married 43 years later. That has been very powerful for me.

GEORGIE FROST: Finally, we mentioned at the start about tough times. I imagine through your career you’ve seen some really tough times. I don’t know if it’s been the financial crisis then followed by a pandemic, followed by war, etcetera. But there have been tough times over the decades, and how do you get through it as a leader?

JOE DAVIS: Well, first off...

GEORGIE FROST: And not just get through it, how do you get your company to succeed? We’re not just trying to exist here.

JOE DAVIS: Right. I think first off, as the leader, I’m going to repeat some themes here, but you have to be at least confident enough in yourself and in the organization. Which then means you have to be confident enough or vulnerable enough to know: I need to engage multiple people at multiple levels to help us get through this.

I think also, if there’s tough times, and this I’ve learned later on, being honest and open with everybody, the challenge the company’s facing, engaging people to team with you to solve those. I
I think that’s how you get through these. But it does have to start... I mean, we talk about vulnerability is important, you also have to have, let me be clear, a level of confidence.

We said tough leaders make decisions. I think the best make decisions that are thoughtful, but they make them as quickly as required. They don’t be indecisive. And then if they discover they’re wrong, they can change the decision, which again requires some humbleness. So it’s confidence and humbleness will help you get through and engaging more than yourself.

GEORGIE FROST: And a loving spouse.

JOE DAVIS: Yes. Yes. That helps a lot. And actually, my kids love me too.

GEORGIE FROST: Joe, thank you so much and to you for listening. We’d love to know your thoughts. To get in contact leave us a message at theswwhat@bcg.com. And if you like this podcast, why not subscribe and leave a rating wherever you found us? It helps other people find us to.