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## Know Enough Not to Act Like a Know-It-All

Executives who act like they have all the answers often reject input from others—to their detriment. But recovery is possible



ILLUSTRATION: ALISON SEIFFER

By Joann S. Lublin

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Ambitious executives often act like they know everything. In hindsight, some professed know-it-alls say they didn't realize how little they knew about getting ahead.

Just about everyone has run into this breed of boss or colleague: They typically exclude others from decisions, cut off opportunities for collaboration, dominate meetings and resist criticism. Know-it-alls behave this way to inspire confidence and avoid looking weak, according to leadership coaches and workplace researchers.

Vik Verma, chief executive of 8x8 Inc., [EGHT 1.05%](#) ▲ a cloud-based communications provider based in San Jose, Calif., says he used to pretend he had all the answers to avoid appearing vulnerable. Advancing to a senior management role by his late 20s, "I was this wonder kid who could do no wrong," he adds. "When all my decisions turned out right, I actually believed that I knew it all."

Previous generations of know-it-all business leaders often flourished. "Now, the level of complexity and depth of knowledge needed to lead effectively makes that approach impossible," says Paul Winum, co-head of the board and CEO practice at RHR International LLP, a leadership-development firm.

Know-it-all behavior "is the biggest flaw I see in people who are not successful," says James Kilts, a Pfizer Inc. director and former CEO of Gillette Co. Yet asking for advice "is never a sign of weakness," he says.

Still, many former know-it-alls say they ultimately learned to become more inclusive decision makers. Aron Schwartz, managing partner at ACON Investments LLC, has interviewed numerous C-suite candidates for the private-equity firm's portfolio companies since 1999. "A significant proportion had recovered from being know-it-all

executives,” he says. “They recognized their job is to prioritize colleagues’ best ideas, not to formulate all those ideas.”

Mr. Verma says his wake-up call occurred in 2000. He then was running Savi Technology, a logistics startup he had joined as a design engineer. He says he did no research before buying a \$3.8 million house in a tony San Francisco suburb that year—for cash. Friends assured him California real estate never lost value.

“If you know it all, you tend to surround yourself with people who just agree with you,” he says.

The stock market crashed two weeks later. In a matter of months, his home lost about \$2 million of its appraised value and didn’t fully recover before he sold it in 2005. “It was my first significant personal financial decision,” Mr. Verma says. “I had botched it completely.”

The costly mistake persuaded the Savi leader to recruit executives with different viewpoints and backgrounds. He says he began requiring candidates for management positions to call him an idiot during interviews and point out something he was doing wrong with the company. Since assuming command of 8x8 in 2013, he has expanded his requirement to all fresh hires, implementing the best ideas and giving those employees a plaque.

The CEO says he also reminds staffers he doesn’t have all the answers and encourages them to challenge him “if you ever see me doing something stupid.” His approach may be paying off; 8x8’s revenue has more than doubled during his tenure.

Novice executives find it especially challenging to curb their know-it-all tendencies—as Gaurav “G” Chhabra says he discovered. In 2005, General Electric Co. promoted the then-35-year-old to his first executive role.

Mr. Chhabra took charge of a portion of its GE Capital unit that serviced complex corporate loans, an area he knew little about. He oversaw a fast-growing team of 100 colleagues, 10 times as large as his prior GE team.

“It was scary,” Mr. Chhabra recalls. Eager to be accepted as a credible leader, he says he acted like he had all the answers. Only occasionally did he request input from his team.

That approach led him to hire someone for a professional-level position partly because he spoke well, Mr. Chhabra says, though some team members argued the man lacked substance and would be a poor fit.

The recruit lasted only a year, and his exit “became a defining moment for me” as a leader, Mr. Chhabra adds. “When you listen to the people in the trenches, they know what they are talking about.”

He and the other eight members of his leadership team revamped their hiring process —by giving him one vote in a collective decision rather than veto power. He also made sure he spoke last. The altered process “ran like clockwork,” says Mr. Chhabra, who left GE in 2009 and is now a managing director at AlixPartners, a global consulting firm.

Beth Comstock, another former GE executive, says frank feedback from team members enabled her to shed her know-it-all attitude. Ms. Comstock was vice president of corporate communications when many of her subordinates who were canvassed for her 2002 performance evaluation complained she didn’t ask for their thoughts in meetings.

Stung by the negative feedback, she says she initially found it hard to ask for help and accept criticism. However, she continues, “I am not sure I would have gone further in my career if I had not done that.”

GE elevated Ms. Comstock to chief marketing officer in 2003 and its first female vice chair in 2015. She stepped down in 2017, soon after longtime CEO Jeffrey Immelt left.

A leadership coach helped Pete Stavros, a partner at private-equity firm KKR & Co., to curb his know-it-all tendency several years ago.

When superiors questioned Mr. Stavros's ideas, "I would get very defensive and try to convince them immediately that I was on top of the issue," he recollects. "I was just trying to make my bosses think I knew it all."

Instead, he says, higher-ups told him he was too quick to dismiss criticism. His coach, RHR's Dr. Winum, urged Mr. Stavros to pause before he reacted.

By listening to learn rather than to defend, you recognize "a lot of perspectives are valuable," the KKR executive says. "I'm getting better. But I still have a lot of work to do."

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