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Reflections on a Decade

Skills and Professional Development

I recently celebrated my 10th year as NetApp's general counsel. It's hard to believe a decade has passed since I started. Like raising children, the days are long but the years are short. That cliché seems magnified times 10 in the current COVID-19 work-from-home era, which will persist well into 2021.

With tremendous support and partnership from my colleagues, I have had the privilege to design and implement a new approach to delivering a company's legal services. There have been wins… and losses… and plenty of surprises along the way. Of all the things I could have imagined when I started at NetApp in 2010, leading an organization during a global pandemic certainly was not one of them. As we navigate this massive dislocation, I wonder: What advice would I give to my 2010 fresh-faced, eager self?

1. Big changes are hard to accept

People struggle to accept things that are bold and unfamiliar. New and disruptive ideas, even if well-supported by logic and data, will almost always meet organizational resistance. I saw this firsthand in the early days when I decided to overhaul and restructure the team. My former boss and the former head of HR, both of whom I respect tremendously, were not supportive of the pace and scale of the change I was driving. They essentially said, "That's not how we do things at NetApp."

It was hard. It was draining. And it was lonely. Making those changes made me unpopular with many people. When you make tough choices like that, you will not get credit for it at the time. In hindsight, however, people will come to value your willingness to push for necessary but difficult changes. I

think leaders here now admire me for making those tough calls. The results speak for themselves.

2. Passive, not active, resistance is the real problem

Any leader taking over a new team or organization can expect resistance. Some of it will be overt: people openly bristling at the new direction. This type of direct challenge is obviously difficult, but usually not derailing. Active fighters will meet you on the battlefield. They may win or lose, but you move on.

The real challenge is passive resistance. Passive players don't announce themselves or confront you, they simply slow everything down with their inertia and quiet negativity. These people are tourists, gumming up the works and impeding change as others around them are pushing to accomplish something. If you have enough of these tourists on your team — and it doesn't take many — you lose clarity, purpose, and momentum.

I have been able to sway (sometimes goad, occasionally cajole) active resisters. Passive resisters will feign alignment in the room, but revert to old unhelpful behaviors when no one is watching. It may feel counterintuitive, but with passive resisters, I think it is more compassionate to cut and move on, because tolerating that toxicity will infect other parts of the team.

3. Don't be afraid to be a first mover

When it comes to making your team better, continuous optimization is important, but there are times when you have to push into unfamiliar ground. Sometimes you might spot a need that is so new or unproven that there really are no examples or blueprints to draw from.

In 2010, we declared a war on paper. At that time, we had to fight our own team to adopt electronic signatures (which seems so quaint today). It was hard to get going, but it proved a huge positive in our speed and efficiency. And of course, just a few years later, this is a basic tool for every team. I am glad we didn't wait.

A few years later, we were early movers again, embracing the vision of a smaller and more nimble team. This was both a response to challenges in our business, but also a calculated bet that a tight, disciplined team connected through technology and efficient processes could ultimately be more productive. Looking backwards, and watching our team effectively manage through today's WFH paradigm, that was a winning bet.

I've also made mistakes going first. I've made decisions that cost the team money, time, and wasted effort. I hate being wrong, but I am OK with that because a willingness to be wrong it essential to discovering a new path.

4. Question everything

Being new is the best time to ask dumb questions. Being "old" may be the second-best time. When you are new, people indulge the dumb questions because you are coming up to speed. When you are old, people indulge them because they think you know something by virtue of your experience

that they may not.

Most people are uncomfortable asking basic questions. They are held back by fear — of embarrassment, of loss of face — and so simply accept things as they are. If you embrace a questioning, open mindset you can sometimes uncover important opportunities for change.

5. There’s no such thing as “too fast”

In my experience, I have never seen a legal team go too fast. They have natural brake pedals built into their DNA. We are genetically predisposed to pause, reflect, examine, inspect. That’s a great thing and it protects the company. So my job isn’t to buoy those instincts — I don’t need to. My job is to know when and how to override them and get the team going faster.

6. Build a trusted network

Fostering an external network of people you trust is critical. Being a GC is often lonely and complicated. While your client clearly is “the company,” you serve many masters. No matter how amazing your coworkers are — and mine are second to none — you will face challenges where you need outside sounding boards. I think I have done an adequate job of this, but there is not a single day where I couldn’t have done just a bit more — and I think the people with the very best external networks are at a distinct advantage.

7. Learn everything about your company

No surprise, but companies are incredibly complex organisms and you need to be deliberate about understanding its many subcultures and what underpins the various assumptions, attitudes, and biases that evolve around different leaders, geographies, and business units. I made two trips around the world in my first six months. I wish it had been four, and I wish I could do that again right now.

Even after 10 years, I’m still learning more about our company, our business, and our people. This is the longest I’ve ever worked in one organization, and I feel like there is still so much to discover. It never gets dull because it is constantly changing and evolving.

8. Don’t live or die by what people say about you

You are never as good as what your greatest advocate tells you. You are also never as bad as your worst critic wants you to believe. It is hard not to be affected by strong praise or harsh criticism, but it is important to try to rise above it. This is especially hard for me given what I know about my personality. I am hypercompetitive. I love winning and hate with equal passion being told I am wrong. This will always be part of me.

Share the praise liberally and swallow the criticism quietly by yourself.

9. Take nothing for granted

Appreciate what you have. You never know when it can be taken away. I’m sure no one was sitting in a conference room in late 2019 saying, “It’s so great how we can all get together and meet like this.” Enjoy what you have and show appreciation and gratitude for the people in your life. I am so grateful that NetApp hired me 10 years ago. For every day since then, NetApp has provided an environment for growth, development, and deep meaningful relationships with my amazing colleagues and teammates.

Matt Fawcett



GENERAL COUNSEL

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