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CORNER OFFICE

OPENERS: There's No Need to Bat .900By **ADAM BRYANT**

This interview of John Donahoe, president and chief executive of eBay since March 2008, was conducted and condensed by Adam Bryant.

Q. What is the most important lesson you've learned about leadership through the years?

A. You can't change people. As a leader, there's a real temptation to try to change people or help people get to where you want them to go. And I learned, actually through experience, that you can't change someone. All you can do is help them help themselves.

And so I spend a lot less time than I used to trying to make people do something that either they can't do, or don't want to do, and spend more time illuminating what needs to get done. And if they make the choice to do it, great. If not, get them into a role where they can do what they're good at.

Q. How has your management style evolved?

A. I was blessed with being part of a really professional service firm, a talent firm, at Bain & Company, for years. I got rigorous performance reviews every six months or so, and in those learned what I needed to develop and work on to go to the next level.

Interestingly, when I became C.E.O. of Bain, I used to get a performance review where my assessment committee would interview 40 partners in half-hour interviews, and I'd get a performance review that was 20 pages thick. Everything I could possibly do better was included in that.

In many ways it was liberating, because I realized feedback's a gift and I wasn't afraid of the feedback. I'd look at it — and a third of it, I said: "You know, that's exactly right. This is going to be a long-term area I'm going to have to get better and better at, and I want to make progress next year, and it will still be an issue that year."

It's kind of a lifelong journey. About a third of it was: "Oh, wow, I didn't realize I was doing that and need to stop doing it, or someone wanted me to be doing something else that I agreed with." And then a third of it, I said: "You know what? Thanks for the feedback. I'm going to ignore it. I'm going to keep doing what I want to do."

I try to do the same for the people around me, and give them open, objective feedback offered in a constructive way. Then each person says, "Here's what I'm good at, here's where my development priorities

are and where I want to get better." And then, as I said earlier, the choice of whether they want to get better is actually their choice. I can't make them do that. And I waste a lot less time than I used to trying to make someone do something they won't choose to do.

Q. Any other ways you've evolved as a manager?

A. Sure. Be more direct in communication. Don't sugarcoat tough news, bad news. Second, there are certain really important decisions to take thoughtful time on, because once you make them, you can't unwind them. There are a lot of other decisions that you're better off making quickly, even if the decision is not the perfect one, and then adjusting down the road, rather than taking too much time.

Q. What questions do you ask of job candidates?

A. A good question is always: "When have you failed and what did you learn from it?" A second question I always ask is, "If I were to talk to your boss, your work colleagues, people who work for you, what would they say about you?" And the quicker I can get them to give adjectives, the more I get to know them. And then I'd say, "If I were to ask those same people what are your priorities? Where do you need to learn, grow, develop?"

Q. How do you make sure you know what people at all levels of the company are thinking?

A. I try to reach into the company and talk to different people at different levels. It's interesting how much companies don't like that. The people who I contact like it, but their bosses or their bosses' bosses don't.

One of the things I've also found really useful over time is any time a senior person leaves, or sometimes a midlevel person, I'll often reach out and say, "Hey, would you either send me an e-mail, or I'd love to get together and I'd love to hear what are the three things that you think I should know about what's going on in the organization that you think I might not be aware of." And then, secondly, "If you were me, what would you do differently from what we're doing?"

And I find that when people are leaving, they're often in a very reflective state and, because they've often made a very difficult decision, they're also just stunningly direct, because it's like they have nothing to lose. In fact, if they care about the company they'll be more direct. And I find I get some very good insights, and they're often quite actionable.

Q. Can you share a couple of specific insights you've gleaned from the exercise?

A. A common theme would be, in recent years at eBay, just how hard it is to get decisions made when you're in the middle of the organization — how it feels like, if you're in the middle of the organization, there are 10 people who can kill a decision but no one person can make the decision.

And so we're now moving to dedicated cross-functional teams in our product development process. It's called agile development, where we're trying to sharpen clarity about who can make the decision and who needs to be involved in the decision.

Q. You want eBay to ... (fill in the blank).

A. To compete for each customer's business and loyalty each and every day, and understand that when you're in the middle of a competition, rarely do you get a whole lot of positive feedback. Rarely is there a lot of glory in it.

I use analogies of the N.B.A. finals or the World Cup. The World Cup final a couple years ago was a really ugly game. Remember it? It was 0-0, and at the end of the day, an ill-timed head-butt, because someone lost his temper, was the difference between winning the World Cup and not winning the World Cup.

Similarly, in the N.B.A. finals, often one team comes out of the gate and wins the first game or second, but then the other team comes back. When you get up to that level, I mean you get up to world class, it's often a dogfight. Who's got a little more endurance? Who's a little tougher? Who has a little more resilience? Who makes one less mistake? And that's the same thing about competing and winning in business.

Another really valuable piece of advice early in my career was from a guy named Kent Thiry, who was another of my early bosses and is now C.E.O. at DaVita.

I didn't know it at the time, but I was suffering from a real fear of failure. Kent said, "You know, John, your challenge is you're trying to bat .900." And he said: "When you were in college, you got a lot of A's. You could get 90, 95 percent right. When you took your first job as an analyst, you were really successful and felt like you were batting .900."

But he said, and this is probably five years into my career: "Now you've moved from the minor leagues. You're playing in the major leagues, and if you expect to bat .900, what happens is, either you come up at bat and you freeze because you're so afraid of swinging and missing, or you're a little afraid to step into the batter's box."

He said, "Best I can tell, the best hitters in Major League Baseball, world class, they can strike out 6 times out of 10 and still be the greatest hitter of all time."

And he said, "That's my philosophy — the key is to get up in that batter's box and take a swing. And all you have to do is hit one single, a couple of doubles, and an occasional home run out of every 10 at-bats, and you're going to be the best hitter or the best business leader around." You can't play in the major leagues without having a lot of failures.

Q. Let's talk about time management. Do you do anything unusual?

A. I take days away. This is the only phone call I'm taking today, because it's a thinking day. It's a day to just get away and step back and reflect. And I find that very hard to do in the office or in a familiar environment.

I find that if I don't schedule a little bit of structured time away, where there's no interruption, that it's very hard to get the kind of thinking time and reflection time that I think is so important.

Q. How often do you schedule them?

A. Not often enough. I'd say probably every two months, and I think I should do it every month. Long airplane flights can sometimes accomplish that — that 10- or 12-hour flight, where there's no e-mail, there's no cellphone.

Q. Are you a gadget person?

A. I couldn't do without my cellphone. I would love to do without my BlackBerry. On the one hand the BlackBerry's a productivity tool. On the other hand, it can be a very fragmenting thing. If I'm spending all day checking my BlackBerry, by definition I'm reactive.

And so I try to only do e-mail first thing in the morning or in the evening, because I find if I check e-mail during the day, I go from being proactive about what I want to get accomplished that day to being reactive, and that's a bit of a trap. Being reactive is a lot easier than being proactive, and e-mail and the BlackBerry are natural tools to facilitate that.

Q. Is there an important list you keep?

A. Well, I keep a copy of a paragraph from a John Gardner speech. He was, I think, one of the wisest observers of society, man, leadership. I keep a laminated copy in my wallet. And once you read it you'll see it's consistent with a lot of what I talked about. It's about how you build purpose and meaning into your life. And to me it also talks about how you win in the right way.

Here is the paragraph:

"Meaning is not something you stumble across, like the answer to a riddle or the prize in a treasure hunt. Meaning is something you build into your life. You build it out of your own past, out of your affections and loyalties, out of the experience of humankind as it is passed on to you, out of your own talent and understanding, out of the things you believe in, out of the things and people you love, out of the values for which you are willing to sacrifice something. The ingredients are there. You are the only one who can put them together into that unique pattern that will be your life. Let it be a life that has dignity and meaning for you. If it does, then the particular balance of success or failure is of less account."

— From a speech John W. Gardner delivered to the Hawaii Executive Conference in Kona, Hawaii, in April 1993 and published in Stanford, an independent publication of the Stanford Alumni Association, March 1994.

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