

He Wants Subjects, Verbs and Objects

This interview of Richard Anderson, chief executive of [Delta Air Lines](#), was conducted and condensed by Adam Bryant.

Q. What was the most important leadership lesson you learned?

A. I've learned **to be patient and not lose my temper**. And the reason that's important is **everything you do is an example**, and people look at everything you do and take a signal from everything you do. And **when you lose your temper, it really squelches debate and sends the wrong signal about how you want your organization to run**. And it was a good lesson. It was a long time ago. And I had a C.E.O. who I was very close to, and he just took me aside and gave me a really short instruction about it. And it was a really important instruction.

We have a tendency in these jobs to push really, really hard and want to go really, really fast. Change can't ever be fast enough. But you do have to be patient enough and make sure that you always remain calm.

Q. Are there other things that you've learned to do more of, or less?

A. You've got **to be thankful to the people who get the work done, and you've got to be thankful to your customers**. So, I find myself, more and more, writing hand-written notes to people. I must write a half a dozen a day.

Q. Looking back over your career, even to the early years, do you recall an insight that set you on a different trajectory?

A. Yes, and it was actually at my first job while I went to night law school at South Texas College of Law. And I had a good full-time job as the administrative assistant to the D.A. And what you understood was **you really needed to be a problem-solver, not a problem-creator. You know, don't bring a Rubik's cube to the table, unless you have an idea on how you're going to try to get an answer**. And always try to be a leader that comes up with the creative answers to the hard problems.

Q. And what about advice on your career?

A. If you just focus **on getting your job done and being a good colleague and a team player in an organization**, and not focused about being overly ambitious and wanting pay raises and promotions and the like, and just doing your job and being a part of a team, the rest of it all takes care of itself.

Q. Did somebody give you that advice, or was that something that you came to understand yourself?

A. My mother and father died from cancer when I was 20, and so I was working full time, and I was pretty fortunate to be around a lot of good people that had that kind of culture and approach to things. It was just by osmosis that I came to those kinds of conclusions.

Q. Let's talk about hiring. What are you looking for in job candidates?

A. Typically, when you're hiring a vice president of a company, they already have the résumé and they already have the experience base. And so what you're trying to find out about are the intangibles of leadership, communication style and the ability to, today, really adapt to change.

And there are a lot of ways to go at that. I like to ask people what they've read, what are the last three or four books they've read, and what did they enjoy about those. And to really understand them as individuals because, you know, the résumés you get are wonderful résumés. Wonderful education, great work history. So you have to probe a little bit deeper into the human intangibles, because we've all seen many instances where people had perfect résumés, but weren't effective in an organization.

So it's not just education and experience. It's education, experience and the human factor. The situational awareness that a person has and their ability to fit into an organization and then be successful in the organization. It's a whole series of intangibles that are almost gut instincts about people.

Q. What other questions do you ask?

A. You want to know about their family. Where they grew up. What their parents did. Where they went to high school. What their avocations were. How many kids they had in their family. You know, what their whole background and history is.

I learned that from a C.E.O. I worked for. The C.E.O. wouldn't really spend that much time on the résumé, but spent most of the time wanting to know everything about the person's life, family, what they liked, where they liked to go on vacation, what their kids were like. And it gave you a really good perspective about who they were as people.

You spend more of your waking time with your colleagues at the office than you do with your family and when you bring someone into that family — we have 50 senior leaders at our company and 70,000 employees — you need to make sure that they're a fit to the culture. And that they're going to be part of that group of people in a healthy functioning way.

Q. What are you listening for as somebody describes their family, where they're from, etc.?

A. You're looking for a really strong set of values. You're looking for a really good work ethic. Really good communication skills. More and more, the ability to speak well and write is important. You know, writing is not something that is taught as strongly as it should be in the educational curriculum. So you're looking for communication skills.

You're looking for adaptability to change. You're looking at, do you get along well with people? And are you the sort of person that can be a part of a team and motivate people? You know, do you have the emotional I.Q.?

It's not just enough to be able to just do a nice PowerPoint presentation. You've got to have the ability to pick people. You've got to have the ability to communicate. When you find really

capable people, it's amazing how they proliferate capable people all through your organization. So that's what you're hunting for.

Q. And is there any change in the kind of qualities you're looking for compared with 5, 10 years ago?

A. I think this communication point is getting more and more important. People really have to be able to handle the written and spoken word. And when I say written word, I don't mean PowerPoints. I don't think PowerPoints help people think as clearly as they should because you don't have to put a complete thought in place. You can just put a phrase with a bullet in front of it. And it doesn't have a subject, a verb and an object, so you aren't expressing complete thoughts.

And a lot of what we do in communication, when you write e-mail, you need to express yourself very clearly so people understand whether we're going to L.A. today or we're going to Boston today.

The second thing is, I think you've got to have what our pilots call operational awareness. You've got to have your head up. You know, when you're flying an airplane, you've got to have your head up and you've got to have situational awareness of everything that's going on around you. There is so much going on in the world today, you've got to know what's going on globally, what's going on around you, particularly today with what's going on in this economy.

And, third, you've got to have not just the business skills, you've got to have the emotional intelligence. It's not just enough to be the best person operating an H.P. calculator. You have to have the emotional intelligence to understand what's right culturally, both in your company and outside your company.

Q. Any good management or leadership books that you've read?

A. I think good history books are the best books on management. And particularly autobiographies and biographies. Right now, I'm reading "Theodore Rex."

Q. What about time management?

A. Only touch paper once. No. 2, always have your homework done. No. 3, return your calls very promptly. No. 4, stick to your schedule. I keep my watch about 10 minutes ahead. It's important to run on time, particularly at an airline. And use your time wisely. And then, once a month, take the rest of the calendar year, or the next six months and re-review how you are using your time and reprioritize what you're doing.

Q. How do you run meetings?

A. One, get the materials out ahead of time and make sure they are succinct and to the point. Second, start the meeting on time. Third, I tend to be a stoic going into the meeting. I want the debate. I want to hear everybody's perspective, so you want to try to ask more questions than make statements.

I don't think it's appropriate to use BlackBerrys in meetings. You might as well have the newspaper and open the newspaper up in the middle of the meeting. So let's stay focused on what we're doing. Let's have a really good debate, but it can't get uncollegial. If it gets uncollegial, we actually have a bell you can ring, in the conference room.

Q. Tell me more about this.

A. If you are in a really hard debate and somebody veers off the subject and goes after you in a way that isn't fair, you get to ring the bell. It's a violation of the rules of the road. So you ring the bell if something wasn't a fair shot, and we all laugh.

Q. If you had to choose another profession, what would it be?

A. Probably a public defender. I enjoyed doing criminal trial work. Teach law school or go back into health care. You know, I spent three years at [UnitedHealth Group](#), and the health care problems we face as a country are so daunting that it would be interesting, particularly given the focus on our government today, on trying to solve that set of problems.

Q. Are you a list keeper?

A. I use Moleskines. It's just lists of things. Sometimes I'll just sit down and write what I'm thinking about things, because I'm not a PowerPoint person. I'll start at the upper left corner of the page and start writing, in complete thoughts, what I think. I have a long paper that I'm writing about our marketing strategy.

Q. What would you like to see business schools teach more?

A. When you're managing as much change as corporations globally must deal with today, **the ability to communicate and communicate effectively is so important that it ought to be a core capability in a business school curriculum.** We measure, study, quantify, analyze every single piece of our business. Business schools in the United States have done a phenomenal job of creating that capability. But then you've got to be able to take all that data and information and transform it into change in the organization and improvement in the organization and the formulation of the business strategy.

You've got to execute, and that human factor part is important. I know it's intangible and it's not like finance where 2 plus 2 is 4. I don't know whether it can be taught, but it can certainly be studied.

“Masters in the art of living make little distinction between their work and their play, their labor and their leisure, their mind and their body, their information and their recreation, their love and their religion. They hardly know which is which. They simply pursue their vision of excellence at whatever they do, leaving others to decide whether they are working or playing. To them they are always doing both.” – James A. Michener (passed on by fellow Chairs Ozzie Gontang and Peggy Beadle).