

THE BEST BUSINESS ADVICE I EVER GOT WISDOM FROM CEOs, BOSSES, MOMS, JAPANESE TITANS, AND MORE

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Anne Wojcicki
The 23andMe CEO
and DNA pioneer
was the first to earn
FDA approval for a
direct-to-consumer
genetic cancer-risk
test.

I was raised in this family culture where there was the assumption that you're never done—you can always make something better. I would write a paper and then I'd give it to my mom, and it would come back solid red, and she'd be like, "You can either turn this in and you'll get a C or a D, or you can rewrite it." And then you rewrite it. "Well, now it's better. Now it's a B." And you want to rewrite it again.

I really admire how my mom teaches kids. She doesn't use punishment. It's, "You turned this in and it was bad. Learn." I do that with people here. Someone might execute on a project really poorly, and I give them feedback. They're like, "OK. Let me try it again." I'm like, "That's awesome. Totally. Let's do it again. Let's try it a different way."

When we try out new products here, I tell my employees they should assume that some things will resonate with people and some things won't. And the things that don't are not failures. They're just something you learn from. You should be a constant learning machine. Totally embrace when something doesn't go right. It's not something to be embarrassed about. Most things in life don't work, and if you don't learn from them, how are you ever going to figure out what does work?

It's really hard to get something completely right. As a business leader, you have to be very comfortable being criticized and recognize it's not about you. It's about learning how to be even better. And who wants to be in a static state? People tend to look at success and failure as black and white. For me, it's like you're always moving. I come from the science world. You're like an atom. You're constantly vibrating.

Right when I graduated from college, my sister was working at Intel, and I remember asking her about the culture. She was like, "Anne, I'm going to give you this book called *Only the Paranoid Survive* [by former Intel CEO Andrew Grove]." It resonated with me—that mentality of, you never sit back and think, "I'm so great." The reality is, there's a lot of luck in everyone's success. You can get taken down at any time, and great ideas can come from anywhere.

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I was really lucky, because I started my career working for the Wallenberg family in Sweden. They were truly wonderful. They care for you when you're sick. They treat you like they're investing in you for the long run. They basically hire for life.

I look at 23andMe employees with that same kind of attitude. These are humans. If you create a great culture, those humans are happier, obviously. But it also pays rewards in terms of overall company success. Productivity is higher. Recruiting is easier; more people want to join. I've learned from working in some really awful environments on Wall Street. When we do our new-hire training, I like to ask, "Who here has a [former] boss in jail?" Because I do. I know what it's like to work for people who look at you as disposable.

I think that the most important things I can do as a leader are to be accessible and to be real. There's a children's album from the 1970s called *Free to Be ... You and Me* by Marlo Thomas. I have it on my phone. One of the stories in there is about when you're a kid and you watch an ad on TV of somebody who's really happily housecleaning. And it tells you: They're lying. They're a paid actress; no one likes housecleaning. It made me really aware of what's an image and what's real. I have this issue—like, I really hate wood veneer. Hate it. You made it look real. It's just a strip of wood over particle board. There's nothing wrong with being cheap, but don't pretend to be fancy and be cheap underneath.

It's translated. I don't wear makeup to work. I don't tend to really dress up. I chose an office in the middle of the floor with glass on both sides because I like seeing what people are doing and I like being seen. I think my employees find me approachable in part because I'm not trying to put on an image. There's no marketing in me. I'm not always very polished, but I'm very authentic. I try to get people to embrace really being honest and transparent. It makes your company's communication better, and it makes your employees trust you.

Life is much easier when you don't have to go back in time and try to remember, "What did I say? What was the spin on that press release?" That's something I learned in my days on Wall Street too. Don't pretend that you're this well-established company when you actually have a lot of work to do. Eventually, there's sufficient information available about you. People pay the price for pretending to be something they're not. —As told to Kevin J. Ryan