

BUSINESS DAY

Danielle Moss Lee: Don't Give Difficult Employees a Pass

Corner Office

By ADAM BRYANT JULY 1, 2016

*This interview with **Danielle Moss Lee**, chief executive of the Y.W.C.A. of the City of New York, was conducted and condensed by **Adam Bryant**.*

Q. Tell me about your early years.

A. I grew up in Manhattan, on the Upper West Side, when it was a really diverse neighborhood, a version of New York that I love and often miss. I had a truly integrated childhood in a way that I'm not sure reflects the neighborhood in its current iteration.

I was part of some really great community-based organizations, and that's where people first said to me that I could be a leader. I was a good student, but I didn't get that same level of affirmation in school.

And I had some amazing opportunities, including from my church and the Y.M.C.A., ironically. I came in one day and the director said, "Do you want to go to Japan?" A number of Y's were working with a philanthropist to send some young people abroad. So I ended up spending five weeks in Tokyo as a 15-year-old. There were some really life-changing experiences that just popped up because someone

saw something in me.

Did you take on leadership roles in these after-school programs?

I was president of the Baptist Youth Fellowship at my church, sat on my school's disciplinary committee, and I was chief justice of the Y's Youth and Government Program.

As I was growing up, my mother always had leadership roles in her jobs, and she often took me to work. So it just seemed natural for me, after seeing how she interacted with her team, and how compassionate she was. It just seemed like that's what you do.

How else did she influence you?

She was a librarian by training, and we always had tons of books around, so I was reading at a pretty high level early on. I definitely came from a family that believed you were made more humane through education, rather than pursuing education with this idea that there was going to be a big payoff. I never aspired to be rich.

How has your leadership style evolved?

Early on, it's easy to think that the people you work with all share our goals, share our values and share our work ethic. But I've learned not to take anything for granted. You can't assume that everybody's moving in the same direction. You can't assume that people want you to win and be successful.

I would also say that I'm pretty confident now as a leader. I'm not looking for anyone to validate that for me. I've had staff follow me from different organizations, so that must mean I'm doing something right.

I'm also more gentle with myself. Sometimes you see something in a candidate and you make an offer, and it turns out to be a disaster. Sometimes you see something that's not there, and your mind kind of fills in the blanks of the conversation.

And some people are really good at gaming the system. You might invest in

someone, and they have a different agenda than what they've shared with you. People talk a lot about horrible bosses. People don't really talk about horrible employees and the stress that comes from having to manage those situations.

If you have a difficult person on your staff, people are watching the dynamics of how you handle conflict. And if you let that person persist and make everyone else around them miserable, that's also a reflection on your leadership. So I've learned to act quickly. We can't have our young people in the presence of people who don't have their best interest at heart.

I've also learned that patience is not wasting time. Patience is about building the foundation to do the things that matter. You have to have some wins in there, of course, but you also have to pace yourself.

What's it like to work for you?

I'm not a micromanager. If I give you a task, unless you say something to me I cross it off my list, and I consider it done. For the people who have worked with me the longest, that has worked. For other folks, I probably could do a little bit more checking in than is my nature.

Sometimes you supervise the way you wish people had supervised you. I always felt like, I'm smart, I can figure it out, leave me alone. Some people don't want you to leave them completely alone, so I think that's definitely an area for me to focus on a little bit more.

How do you hire?

Some of the conversation may have nothing to do with the actual role. At this level, you want to see how people think, how they solve problems, what their motivation is to do the work that they do, how the role potentially fits into the goals that they have for themselves.

I'll also ask questions about the relationships they've developed through work, because work is really about relationships. Everything I've been able to accomplish is not because of anything I learned in a book or in a classroom or through professional development. It's always about building relationships.

And I always ask about their worst job and their worst boss. If people tell me they've never had either, then I've got a bridge I'd like to sell them. I want to know how they handle conflict. If you've got three résumés, and they're all comparable, the thing that's going to make the difference is how they function under pressure.

What's your best advice for new college grads?

Don't take yourself so seriously. I had a lot of opportunities educationally and outside of the classroom, but I didn't feel like I was in this constant pressure cooker. I didn't feel like the whole world was going to cave in.

It's important for people to establish a sense of their own value beyond some of the standard markers of success, like getting into certain schools. There's more to life than whether you got this job or that fellowship. You've got to be really intentional and clear about who you are, what you want for yourself, and how you define success.

Each week, Adam Bryant talks with top executives about leadership. Follow him on Twitter: [@nytcornerooffice](https://twitter.com/nytcornerooffice). This interview has been edited for space and clarity.