



Sarah Dunn, global human resources officer, Tapestry



Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR.

"Leadership is About Questioning Rather Than Having The Answers"

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***Sarah Dunn**, the global human resources officer at Tapestry, shared smart insights about fostering an environment of*

*diversity and inclusion, and the importance of vulnerability for effective leadership, in this latest installment of CHRO interviews that I'm doing with my colleague **David Reimer**, CEO of **The ExCo Group**.*

Reimer: You've been in HR for about 14 years. What do you know now about the job that you wish you had known earlier?

Dunn: I wish I'd known how much fun and how challenging it was going to be much earlier in my career because I was a bit of an accidental HR person. I was given a fabulous opportunity in my previous company to move over from a line role to lead HR.

When I was first asked to take an HR role I was a bit reluctant, but within 24 hours, I knew that I'd found my forever home. I enjoy the incredible mix of challenges and levers that you can pull and influence in the spirit of driving the business.

Reimer: What do you see as the most challenging aspect of the job?

Dunn: The most challenging and rewarding part of the job are the human interactions. You can figure out the big logistical, operational and analytical pieces, which I love, and the programmatic challenges, including performance management and talent development.

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is a constant puzzle."

But at the end of the day, human nature is unknowable and always surprising and often ambiguous. It's about helping people become their best selves and helping the organization become its best self to drive our business. It's all about people, and that is a constant puzzle.

Bryant: This job provides a lens into the psychology of human beings at work. What have you learned from that?

Dunn: We all have our own fragilities, and often way more insecurities, than are apparent. Also, learning how to be vulnerable to trust and to grow together is where you get the best results out of individuals and teams.

I wish I'd learned earlier in my own career how to be more vulnerable. There are still times when I feel defensive and don't want to open myself up, and then there are moments of humility and learning and vulnerability, which always move the needle in a positive way.

Being vulnerable is a very daunting thing to do and to be, and too many people spend their lives either not owning up to that or not being comfortable doing that or not being in an environment where they feel comfortable doing that.

Bryant: What are the next big issues for the HR profession as you look five years out?

Dunn: Well, there is a good question about whether HR is yet a profession because it varies so much in every company and there isn't a formal track or formal education. While many MBA programs have a leadership track, and there is some human capital management embedded in many of the classes, very few of them have a track that is dedicated to human resources. I would love to see that become more formalized over time.

Long-term, my hope is that all the "administrivia" becomes easier and we can spend less time on the operational topics, and enable our employees to deal with many of their day-to-day, "1-800-call-HR" questions directly

The goal is to make it consumer-grade easy for our employees to work at Tapestry. That way, HR can spend more time on the higher-value work, which I think it is all about team optimization.

Bryant: How do you think about operationalizing the idea of inclusion?

Dunn: One of the things we do is have a regular conversation series. It's called "Tapestry Unscripted," and we bring in speakers from the outside.

We've had a real variety, including a nun working with the homeless in New York, a homeless man, and our board chair and now CEO, Jide Zeitlin, who talked about his experience growing up in America after coming to this country from Nigeria. They are very human moments.

That series has brought an authentic dialog into the company in a way that simply proclaiming our value of Inclusivity cannot. So we're trying to live inclusion every day in terms of the conversations we're having. And the more you have them, the more the conversations change and expectations get raised.

You also have to keep digging to understand what's causing people not to feel that they can be their authentic selves. While the diversity element is huge — we want to make sure we've got an inclusive and diverse workforce — it all links back to psychological safety and the ability, willingness and the space to be your authentic self.

Reimer: If you were advising a new CEO on how to work with her CHRO, what would you say?

Dunn: If you select your CHRO well, you should engage them and bring them into every struggle and every challenge because the more we understand, the more we can help. But it has to be a two-way street. There's got to be complete trust, which is difficult and challenging to build and easy to destroy, but that's what makes the role so rewarding.

And I would say to any new CEO that the more you accept feedback, the more you listen to what your CHRO is hearing as a broader voice of the organization, the more effective you will be as a leader.

Reimer: And if a CHRO were interviewing for different jobs and was, in effect, interviewing the CEO, what should they be asking the chief executive about HR and culture?

Dunn: Ask the CEO what their priorities are for HR. What are they struggling with? What is the culture ? When did they last do an engagement survey? What's on the action plan from that? How is top talent feeling? Have they got a succession plan? This will tell you a lot about the importance of talent and the focus on the talent agenda.

You want to engage the CEO and the leadership in their experience about working with HR, but any executive's view is highly dependent on their previous HR experiences. If they don't know that they need HR or the value they will get from it, it just makes the work of HR more challenging to help unlock the value that we can provide.

Bryant: Tell us more about you personally. Were you in leadership roles early on?

Dunn: Yes. I had always enjoyed being a leader, but I was called "bossy" as a child, as many female leaders are. I went to a very formal British private school and I was a leader in the school.

Bryant: Do you see strands of your parents' influence in your leadership style today?

Dunn: Yes, more and more. My dad was a surgeon and was born in China in the 1920s; his parents had been missionaries there in the 1920s. I come from a long line of strong women. It was my grandmother who first went to China and then my grandfather followed her there and they got married.

My mum was ostensibly a stay-at-home mum to me and my 4 siblings, but she was so involved in community and charities and giving back that she was in effect working more than full time while also doing some part-time work for my dad.

They both gave me an incredible work ethic. We were expected to work hard, do well, give back. My father was always encouraging. When we did well, his phrase was always, “well done.” It was never effusive. It was never “fantastic.” The message was well done, and now get on with the next thing.

Reimer: Other leadership lessons you’ve learned over your career?

Dunn: It comes back to listening. Understand that you can learn more from the people you’re leading than you can teach them. You need to have that vulnerability, but as a young leader, I thought that I had to have all the answers. I’m still learning that leadership is about questioning rather than having the answers and then helping decide what the right answers are.

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Another is the importance of being aware of the whole person because we all bring different things into every work situation, and you don't

know what people are dealing with. One thing that is incredibly challenging in HR is that you hear about the all difficult situations that employees are going through. That can feel overwhelming at times because with 22,000 people, we've got people dealing with every form of human misfortune.

Reimer: If you were hosting a dinner party with other CHROs, what topic or challenge would you want to put on the table to start a rich conversation.

Dunn: Influence — how do you increase influence with leaders and frankly any human being? If we're in the business of optimizing people performance, being able to influence is absolutely key. That ranges from feedback to coaching to trust and all of the things we've already talked about. If you set aside all the other things that HR needs to do and CHROs need to do, the role is ultimately about having influence.