



Pat Wadors, Chief Talent Officer of ServiceNow



## Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR.

# "Pick Your Battles and Be Brave in Those Moments that Really Matter."

Published on December 9, 2019



Adam Bryant [in](#)

Managing Director at The ExCo Group (formerly Merryck & Co. Americas)

***Pat Wadors**, chief talent officer of ServiceNow, shared smart insights on the dangers of "chasing the wrong rabbits" in business, and why cultures need flagpole moments, with me and **David Reimer**, my colleague and CEO of **The ExCo Group**, a senior leadership development and executive mentoring firm.*

**Reimer: How did you get into the field of HR?**

Wadors: I've been a fine artist since I was about eight years old. I did all kinds of different art and pursued that in school and was quite good at it. I also was an athlete, but I was terrible as a student.

I'm the baby out of eight, so I knew I could on occasion out-manuever my siblings, but I couldn't put my thoughts on paper somehow. I couldn't spell, I couldn't do math. Something was off. My mom passed away when I was 19, and so I moved back home with my dad and went to LSU. I visited the career center, and they discovered that I like social work, teaching or HR.

And then the woman at the career center said, "And what do you do about your disability?" She identified me as dyslexic. I didn't know what that was. After she explained it, I was so relieved because she said it had nothing to do with my IQ, but rather how I process.

Both my dad and my uncle were in HR, so I asked them, what do you do and why do you do it? What do you love, what do you hate? My uncle described the different components, including recruiting,

compensation, benefits, and training. He also explained to me that, on average, 80 percent of a company's operational expense is the cost of talent. This still holds true today.

Then he said, "What do you want to do? Do you want to be a recruiter?" I said, "No, I'm going to run HR." Then he said, "No, really. What do you want to do? Do you want to do comp?" And I said, "No. I'm running HR. I want 80 cents on that dollar. I'm going to turn every knob and make amazing companies." When I convinced him of that, he became my first mentor and helped me navigate my career.

### **Reimer: So what is your framework doing this job?**

Wadors: There are a few different things I look at. One is, where is the business going? Give me a vision that's three, five years out, even longer. Are we going to be a \$10 billion company, or \$20 billion? Which countries will we be in? Are we going to have multiple products or a core one? Are we going to be known as the best place to work or not? I'll ask a ton of questions.

And then I reverse engineer from those answers where HR — our services, our practices, the health of the company — has to be, because I have to be two years ahead of each of those key milestones or else the company won't achieve its goals.

Then there's a platform play you've got to build in order to scale, and that includes talent segmentation and how you compete for talent. That's how you differentiate in the market in order to get the best talent

in your door in an affordable way and keep them.

It's about creating an employee-employer value proposition. What's our promise for you to do your best work ever? And that becomes our talent roadmap compass. I use a lot of different tools to figure all this out. In the last eight or ten years, I've honed the mission of my function, and it's basically to create a high-performing healthy company that scales, because I love growth. How do you know what great performance is? You have to be careful what you measure. I've learned that the hard way. I've chased the wrong rabbits.

It's about creating a healthy organization, meaning respectful, high integrity, compliant, global, nuanced. The energy is high, there's respect, there's diversity, inclusion and belonging, people feel like they matter, and that you're there to take care of them when needed. You can feel it. You walk into a company, you can feel it in the lobby, you can feel it in the elevator. I want the energy.

**Bryant: Can you talk more about how the profession sometimes chases the wrong rabbits?**

Wadors: One "wrong rabbit" is potential. How do you discern potential in an employee? Is it potential in the current gig, potential to grow in another gig, potential of what? That label is loaded. I'd rather measure learning agility and how that's demonstrated. That's something tangible. Potential is very subjective.

Quality of hire is another. You can assess for certain skills such as

learning agility or decision-making, but the quality of hire is a rearview-mirror measure. It can give you predictability in how to hunt for talent later, but not in the moment.

*"When companies fixate on top talent all the time, there's a huge cost to that."*

Everyone says they want top talent. But do you need to buy top talent for every role? When companies fixate on top talent all the time, there's a huge cost to that. Some people are what I call "pros in place." Not everyone needs to climb a ladder or change the world. They love what they do. How do you measure that in a healthy way?

**Bryant: If you were giving career advice to those who'd like to become a CHRO, what else would you say?**

Wadors: You have to understand the business and what it means to be an operator. I've jumped out of HR several times to learn the business. I've done sales, I've done Oracle implementation, and process design. You have to understand the quarterly cadence, and when to infuse change in a company, because if you don't know that, you're going to fail. You don't do HR just for HR, and those who never understand that just roll out programs, and that's a loss. They might be wonderful programs, but they're lost because of timing or intent. They're not solving a need.

The other thing is to understand technology and how it can serve your people. Learn it, embrace it, and understand that it's part of your platform for scale. You cannot do what we do anymore without understanding technology in some way, shape or form.

I would add a point about courage. If you're going to sit in this chair, be willing to be fired and to hold the mirror up. I want to be loved, but I demand respect. This is a lonely role. It's the one role in which you can't really be part of the core leadership team in the truest sense, because you also have to be apart from them.

**Reimer: Can you unpack that idea of being willing to be fired? What does that mean day-to-day?**

Wadors: Be willing to tell your boss the truth, but know how to do it so that you're heard. I can just be gutsy, but if I just say something that angers you and leads to me being fired, then I've failed to influence. So pick your battles, and be brave in those moments that really matter to say, this is a defining moment. I've had a few of them, and it means taking a stand and knowing it's going to be uncomfortable for them and you.

*"If you're not pushing on those moments, that's dangerous."*

But try to do it as gracefully as you can so you don't put anyone in a corner. Give them an out so they maintain their self-respect. But if

you're not pushing on those moments, that's dangerous.

I call them flagpole moments. Every organization has them. What do you do with yours? If you have a bad situation, there should be zero tolerance, and you need a flagpole moment. Once that occurs, you level-set the playing field. It sets a tone. You only need a half-dozen of these in strategic areas to establish cultural norms. Employees are looking for them. What's the consequence of not behaving properly? What's the consequence of cheating?

**Reimer: What were some other early influences from your childhood that help people understand what makes you tick?**

Wadors: As I mentioned earlier, I grew up as the baby in a large family, and I lost a brother when I was eight. I wasn't great in school, and so I never felt like I belonged anywhere, and I didn't want to be judged.

Humans like to put people in boxes. You're in this group or that group. But if you're different enough, there's no box. Then I realized that by being me and pursuing what I love and how I saw the world, the world became nicer. I realized I wasn't the only one looking for that connection and care. And that's why I want to help create caring companies that change the world.