



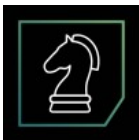
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My Network



Rhonda Morris, chief human resources officer of Chevron



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# "This Role is Fascinating Because It's a Job Almost Without a Job Description"

Published on December 3, 2019



**Adam Bryant** 

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

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***Rhonda Morris**, the chief human resources officer of Chevron,*

*shared smart insights about the subtle challenges of the role and her practice of building a personal "board of directors" with me and **David Reimer**, my colleague and CEO of **The ExCo Group**.*

**Reimer: How did you get into HR in the first place?**

Morris: My story is a bit nontraditional because I'm a write-in candidate. I went on a campaign to get hired by Chevron 25 years ago, specifically for our human resources development program. We were one of the first large multinational companies to have a dedicated program for HR professionals. I found that very attractive. I went to graduate school in Boston. It was very cold. I'm from northern California. I wanted to come home.

And I wanted to work for Chevron. My grandfather was a laborer in Louisiana for Exxon. My father always thought that working for oil companies was a big deal, so telling him that I got a job at Chevron was like giving him a Christmas gift.

I wanted to be an English teacher early on. Coaching, including focusing on development and learning, is part of what we do in these roles. I get a mix of learning and growing and developing myself, and helping other people learn and grow and develop. I will go back to my dream of being a teacher at some point. That will be my next career.

**Reimer: Are there people from earlier in your life who helped shaped who you are as a leader?**

Morris: One of my biggest influences was my algebra teacher when I was in ninth grade. In eighth grade, I was the smartest kid in the class at our Catholic school, and I knew it. I won the general excellence award, and there was a big presentation in front of all of the parents.

Then I went to this very rigorous college-prep Catholic high school. I vividly remember sitting in algebra class, and I had never learned algebra before, and it may as well have been Latin because I did not know any of the material. I would sit in that class almost praying for the teacher not to call on me because I couldn't answer any of these questions.

I had to work up the courage to ask my teacher for help. I told her, "I don't know what you're talking about. I don't understand this material." She stayed after school with me every day for probably a month to help me catch up.

*"What I learned from that time  
is that it's okay to be  
vulnerable and to ask for  
help."*

What I learned from that time is that it's okay to be vulnerable and to ask for help. I have taken it with me everywhere, including in this job. For every job I've had, I have created my own sort of "board of directors." I ask myself, where are my gaps? Who can help me? And then I just go ask them to help me.

This is the first job I've had where everybody on my "board of directors," with the exception of one person, is significantly younger than I am. I would not be sitting here talking to you without the help of a small army of people, and because of what I learned from my ninth-grade math teacher.

**Bryant: Let's shift to your role today. How is it different than what you expected?**

Morris: I would start by saying that I am still a work in progress. This role is fascinating because it's a job almost without a job description. If you're a CFO, you've got all kinds of requirements and timelines that are external and regulated. We have a few of those in HR, but nothing near the magnitude of what the CFO role has, for example. We live in a world where virtually everything is gray, rather than black and white.

For me, the HR function was probably the most familiar aspect to manage from an understanding of how the machine works, because I've been here for a long time. I understand our service delivery and operating model, and how we support the business outcomes.

The second bucket is the degree of involvement with our board of directors. That's one of the biggest surprises, largely because there is no prior job in the HR function that requires interaction with the board other than the executive compensation role. So how do you understand those dynamics? You can read books and articles, but there is no practical way to get experience beforehand. There are a lot of nuances

there.

The third one is being part of the executive leadership team, which also has very different dynamics.

**Bryant: The CHRO does play a unique role on a leadership team. How do you think about that?**

Morris: I have had to come to peace with the fact that, every day, somebody is not going to happy with me. And that's okay, because it might be an indicator that I'm doing my job well. It's a fine line because you can't play favorites. You have to be viewed as neutral, which in our company is a bit hard because we have a decentralized business model, and people tend to grow up in one of the businesses, each of which has its unique culture. It's about building relationships with people who you didn't grow up with in the company and being viewed as neutral.

**Reimer: Management and boards are increasingly concerned about culture. What's on your culture "dashboard"?**

Morris: We have all kinds of ways for people to raise issues. They can go to HR. They can call 800 numbers. We have an ombuds group. And we monitor those statistics and share that information with our board. We typically have pretty high scores on employee engagement, and we measure our scores against the oil industry and also against high-performing companies. We'll then hear a number of questions from the board, such as, what does that mean, and what do you do with this

data?

The final thing I will share with the board, because we added this to our survey last year, is the data we gather from employees rating the effectiveness of their supervisor. We also have a question on the survey about feeling valued, and that's one I had struggled with because it wasn't clear what made people actually feel valued. I was at our refinery in El Segundo, and they did something I found fascinating.

*The one that got the highest scores was your supervisor saying, "Good job."*

They took the value question and created a storyboard with four quadrants. One was about getting in the form of say, a \$50 gift card. Another box was about the person's supervisor saying to them, "Good job." Another was about the employee's peers saying to them, "Great job." The fourth one was a kind of formal acknowledgment or recognition in their performance appraisal. The cash recognition program got the lowest scores. Now, this is just one sample size, but I was flabbergasted. The one that got the highest scores was your supervisor saying, "Good job."

**Reimer: How else do you signal that leadership matters at Chevron?**

Morris: Our new CEO has a huge focus on leadership. He will

frequently make the statement, “Leaders change outcomes.” For supervisors, part of their performance appraisal going forward will be feedback from their direct reports. This has made everybody sit up straight and take notice. Again, context is always really important. These are opportunities to dig in and find out what’s really happening.

### **Bryant: What is your personal framework for the leadership qualities that matter most?**

Morris: Number one, do people want to work for you and do they want to follow you? You don’t necessarily need a lot of external assessments to figure out who those people are. Everybody knows. I would call that follower-ship. Second, communicating in simple language and connecting with people is a differentiator. How do you constantly simplify messages so that they can be repeated back? My third one is being able to create an environment where people tell you the truth. You have to create a culture where people speak truth to power.

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Published by



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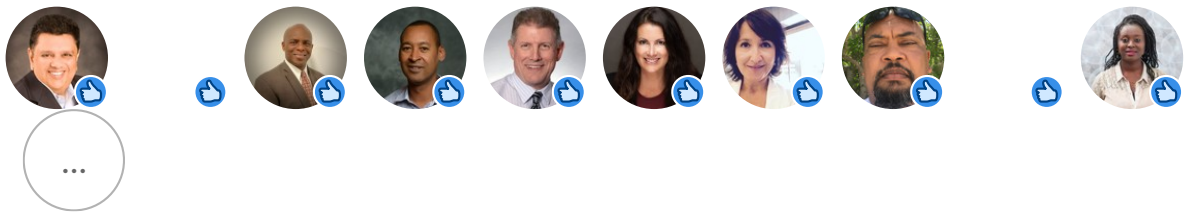
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 **Hitendra Wadhwa** • 2nd 7mo ...  
Professor-Speaker-Founder | Living and Leading from Your Inner Core

Thank you for this interview, Adam and Rhonda! I loved the story about why you went to work for Chevron.

There's one other form of followership I have been quite struck by in leaders who've left inspiring footprints on sands of time. I wonder how this s' ...see more

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 **Rhonda Morris**  • 2nd 7mo ...  
Vice President and Chief Human Resources Officer at Chevron

You are welcome and thank you for the feedback, [Hitendra](#). Agree with your insights that great leaders are great followers of their purpose, principles and inner voice. And your recent interview with [Adam Bryant](#) was exceptional!

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**Prof. (Dr.) N. K. SHARMA, . .** • 3rd+ 7mo ...  
{Adj. Prof. (USA)} {Management & Business Professional, Coach, Mentor}  
{All Rounder - Bus. Admn. & Mgmt.} {Proven, Productive, Passionate, Professional, Placid}

Hitendra Wadhwa - Market forces deviate everything. Cheers,

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 **David Payne** • 3rd+ 10mo ...  
Vice President Health Environment & Safety

Excellent interview and I'd add a few points from my experience with Rhonda. She is honest, humble and down to earth. She has been a good mentor for me, particularly how to navigate the changes we need in society and how to be a positive force for change as a white male in a white male dominated business.



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**Rhonda Morris**  · 2nd  
Vice President and Chief Human Resources Officer at Chevron

8mo ...

**David Payne** - You make "doing the right thing" much easier with your thoughtful and pragmatic approach. Thank you for being a great partner!

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