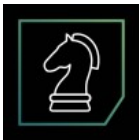




Kathleen Weslock, CHRO of Livent



Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR.

"My Role is to Help See Around Corners By Raising the 'What-If?' Questions."

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***Kathleen Weslock**, the chief human resources officer of Livent, shared compelling insights with me and **David Reimer**, the CEO of **The ExCo Group**, about leading in this crisis, how she hires, and the role that CHROs play on leadership teams.*

Reimer: What has been your playbook on leading through this crisis?

Weslock: There is no playbook, and you have to rely on your team, because everyone has something to contribute. Also, time isn't on your side, so you have to act quickly and you have to pivot quickly if something's not working. And as leaders, we have to show up like a duck — you have to be calm on the surface but paddling like crazy under the surface to keep it all together.

The other thing you learn is that not everyone has the same tolerance for stress and anxiety. True leaders in a time of crisis rise to the top, just like cream, whereas other people just can't take it. You want people who are calm and focused. That's what I look for when I hire HR executives. Who would I want in my lifeboat in a crisis?

Reimer: Can you talk about the role that CHROs need to be playing right now?

Weslock: We need to be working alongside our teams, because it really is a team effort. You have to play your part and raise issues as they come up. As someone who's gone through this, my role is to help see

around corners by raising the what-if questions around performance, how we work and our talent. All the decisions we make are through the lenses of what is best for the employees and what is best for the company, but then we look at the what-ifs and the potential unintended consequences of the decisions we're making.

And now that we have all of our logistics down in terms of working from home, we're turning our focus to talent, and who were the leaders during this crisis, because you see a very different side of people. How did they lead? Who didn't lead? What are our critical roles and do we have a pipeline of talent for those roles?

"Right now, simple acts of kindness as a leader will be remembered for a very long time."

For the leaders who stepped up in critical roles, you need to really take care of them when this is over because they're the people who we really want to make bets on for the future. Right now, simple acts of kindness from leaders will be remembered for a very long time. I've seen too many times in my past career when the senior leadership just disappeared, and that is absolutely the wrong thing to do, particularly in a time like this.

Bryant: I'm intrigued by your point earlier about wanting certain people in your lifeboat during times of crisis. How do you test for

that?

Weslock: When I hire for an HR team, I always hire based on ability — not necessarily the resume, but what I think you can do. And then I also look at how well you play on a team. If you're an independent contributor, that's going to work for some roles, but in most cases HR is a team sport. So I look to see whether the person ever played team sports such as field hockey, basketball, softball or baseball.

I've sat in every chair in HR, including compensation, benefits, employee relations, talent acquisition. I've done all the mechanics, so I can tell pretty quickly if a person is a good mechanic. But I'm looking for that next level of skills — are you able to see around corners and do the what-if scenario planning that's so critical, particularly at times like this?

Bryant: What are the keys to success for a CHRO who's considering joining a new company?

Weslock: Make sure you understand that what the organization is *asking* you to do is truly what the organization *wants* you to do. Headhunters will often say that a company is looking for a transformation expert and a change agent. But they really just want you to take care of the process part of the job, like making sure that the pension calculations are correct. You have to make sure that you and the CEO and the senior leadership team are really in sync about what success looks like for the CHRO.

"Everyone really has to be in sync. When you have it, it's magic."

For CHROs, our tenure these days isn't the longest, and I think the reason for that is because of that mismatch between what you tell me you want and what I'm giving you. And because those relationships in the C-suite can be so delicate, everyone really has to be in sync. When you have it, it's magic. And, it is the second-best role in the company after the CEO.

Reimer: What are the most common mistakes that you've seen CHROs make that cut short their time in the role?

Weslock: A big one is not listening enough. If you're experienced, there can be a tendency when you come into an organization to say, "I've got this, and here's what I've done in the past." Companies are looking for the CHRO to play much more of an advisory and consultative role to get the entire team aligned around certain issues. You get everyone's thinking and provide perspectives on how other companies approach those issues.

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

Weslock: It really varies across companies. HR is perhaps the least understood role in the C-suite. Everyone has their own or different

views of what HR is. Some think you should be like Doris Day — happy every day and doing the picnics. Others think you should be thought of as Doctor No — the enforcer of all policies and the one who finds reasons not to do something. The best HR jobs are where you can sit at the intersection of talent, strategy, and culture, and you can be authentic. You can't be somebody you're not.

Bryant: What were important influences from earlier in your life that really shaped who you are today?

Weslock: I grew up outside of Easton, Pa., a mill town that probably is best known for being the headquarters of Crayola, near Bethlehem Steel, and where the boxer Larry Holmes grew up. So it's a very gutsy area. It was very rural — my address was simply RD4, Easton, Pa. — and it was an idyllic life.

My parents were awesome, and education was important to them. My mom had gone to high school. My dad never went beyond elementary school, because they took the farm kids out of school to tend the mules that pulled the canal boats. But he was a self-made man and ran his own business. I learned the importance of tenacity and humility from him.