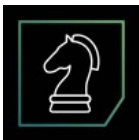




Eric Hutcherson



Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR.

"These Emotional Times Can Make People Have Polarizing Points Of View."

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

Eric Hutcherson**, chief human resources officer of the NBA, shared powerful insights with me and my colleague, **David

*Reimer, the CEO of **The ExCo Group**, on leading during the pandemic, the role of the CHRO on the leadership team, and what George Floyd's death has meant for the NBA and for him personally.*

Bryant: I imagine the killing of George Floyd and the heightened awareness of racism has prompted some powerful conversations in the NBA.

Hutcherson: We've had this conflict internally because we've empowered and encouraged our employees to have a voice, to speak up and to share their strong perspectives. And those employees are the very same ones who turned to our leadership and said, "What are you going to say and what are you going to do about this?"

You have to live your values as an organization. And one of those values is, when atrocities like this happen, we speak. But we don't want to politicize our point of view, because historically it's not what we've done. We've stood for ideals. So that was the biggest issue — what do we do and what do we say and how do we say it?

We've coalesced around three specific pillars: increasing diversity and inclusion in leadership positions both internally and externally; creating economic empowerment for Black people around the world; and finding ways to invest in civic engagement, whether that's creating a foundation at the NBA or funding organizations that help Black and brown people or encouraging more people to go out and vote and to have an impact with their voices in that way.

Bryant: Could you share a bit about how George Floyd's death has affected you personally?

Hutcherson: This has been a really emotional time for me, and I've sort of pivoted at this point. I'm done being angry and now I'm moving to action. I've always committed myself to the idea that, when given the choice of being the angry Black man or being the educator, I always choose to be the educator because I felt like it could take the discussion further, and I could help teach people who otherwise have good hearts but don't know any better.

But I also know that no matter how accomplished I am, no matter how smart I am, no matter what schools I went to, no matter how much money I make, no matter what job I've got, I am a Black man. And that's what I am before I'm any of those other things.

The sadness that I think I carry, that probably most other Black men carry, is impossible to shake. You can do anything you want to do to legitimize yourself, but in some people's eyes, you're still Black. And that's the reality that we live.

Bryant: A lot of companies seem to want to have a conversation about race now, but many seem uncomfortable about starting them. What's your advice to them?

Hutcherson: First of all, welcome to our world. Welcome to being uncomfortable all the time. Welcome to the feeling of not knowing what to say because whatever you say could be considered wrong.

Welcome to the feeling of being on pins and needles because you're not really sure how people are going to take what you say, and if they take it the wrong way, you can be perceived as ignorant or not smart or not capable. So soak in it for a little while and get comfortable with it because that's what we live every day. And then once you have that realization, then we can talk because now you have some perspective.

*"Welcome to being
uncomfortable all the time."*

My second point is to care deeply. No matter how uncomfortable conversations ever are in our lives, when you come from a place of genuine caring, you get through them and you figure out how to have the conversation. It's only when you don't really want to have the conversation that it becomes impossible to have and you don't know where to start.

If you really care, you'll say, "Eric, I don't even know where to start, but I care. So help me know where to start." And what I would say to you is, "Go read." If you want to be educated about the plight of Black people and brown people, go read about it. That will start to give you some perspective on how deep this is, so that you understand it isn't a 20-minute conversation.

Reimer: This conversation is also happening against the backdrop of the pandemic, which obviously has had an enormous impact on the NBA. What are some of the things that you've done to help

navigate that crisis, as well?

Hutcherson: One of the challenges for me as the CHRO has been to figure out how we're going to operate in the future and keeping the lessons from this crisis alive after this is over. I hope that some of the creative and innovative things that we've done will remain part of our everyday lives. I think our colleagues are more engaged now that we're on WebEx and Zoom. I've been talking to China and India and Hong Kong and Latin America this year far more than I ever did.

Reimer: Remote work also has challenges. How do you think about those?

Hutcherson: It does raise questions about efforts to promote diversity, inclusion and belonging. Now that so many people are working at home, their behaviors may reflect unconscious bias or, in some instances, conscious bias. I'm reminding people that in times of stress, they shouldn't shift to their default mechanisms, which can be feeling more comfortable spending time with people who have the most in common with them.

In situations like these, organizations need to be more open to diverse points of view and to people challenging the status quo. These emotional times can make people have polarizing points of view, and they can pull at the fabric of a place if you're not careful.

Reimer: How do you think about the role of a CHRO in an organization. What's your framework?

Hutcherson: We have to be aware. We have to be in tune. I like to say I'm in the problem-avoidance business, not the problem-solving business. I know how to solve problems, and when you mess things up, I can fix it. But I would much rather help you avoid stepping in that hole than tape your ankle after you've stepped in it.

"HR is like the point guard on a basketball team."

CHROs have to be skillful in a lot of different areas. I'm helping to strategize about the future of our business, but at the same time, I'm looking at redeploying colleagues to help in the areas of the business that need it most.

I consider myself to be someone who is focused on the business and the operation as much as I am focused on the people. But in every organization today, the business *is* the people.

**Bryant: Can you talk about the role of the CHRO leadership team?
The dynamics can be tricky there.**

Hutcherson: The secret of any great professional athlete is that they make everybody on the team better. I'm not successful because I get accolades. I'm successful because I help my leaders work through a tricky situation. I'm successful because I get our leadership team to coalesce around an idea that is going to help us perform better as a unit. HR is like the point guard on a basketball team.

Reimer: How should CHRO candidates interview the CEOs they might be working for, to ensure it will be a productive relationship?

Hutcherson: The first thing I would ask a CEO is, “Are you prepared to have a partner who is going to push you, challenge you, disagree with you, and take you out of your comfort zone every day?” Many CEOs like the idea of a strategic CHRO, but they don’t want one in practice.

To be frank, it’s uncomfortable to have that kind of CHRO sitting next to you. Because every day, I’m going to push you. Every day, I’m going to challenge you. Every day, I’m going to take you out of your comfort zone. Every day, I’m going to ask you, “Why?” Every day, I’m going to bring you back to our values to ensure that every decision we make is rooted in them.

If you get through those questions, then the next one is to ask, “What kind of culture are you looking for?” A strategic CHRO who’s really going to work with you needs to understand the environment you’re trying to create. The CHRO has to match where the organization is and where it wants to be in order for that marriage to work.

Bryant: What were important early influences for you growing up?

Hutcherson: I moved from East Orange, N.J., to Freehold, N.J., when I was eight years old. When I got to Freehold, I was the only Black person anyone in that neighborhood had ever seen. I grew up in an all-white, predominantly Jewish community, and had to find a way to assimilate, to be successful, to thrive, to make friends, to establish

credibility and to be productive. That teaches you a lot. That's where the competitive drive comes from. That's where the quest for excellence comes from.

Then I went to high school in a predominantly Black part of town, and at first most of my friends were from my elementary school years, and they were white. So, I was a star basketball player in a predominantly Black school whose friends were mostly white. A situation like that teaches you how to navigate different circumstances.

"I learned how to move in and out of different communities and be successful."

I learned how to move in and out of different communities and be successful. I was on the soccer team and we went to Scotland together. I was on the track team, and I ran hurdles. I was on the basketball team. At the same time, I could go hang out with the kids that didn't play sports at all and be part of that community. All those experiences helped prepare me for this role today. I can spend time with the interns, head to a C-suite meeting and engage in active dialogue with the CEO, have a really difficult discussion to tell someone they no longer work at the company, and then go to a social event and be able to hold court for two hours. That, in many ways, is the definition of a strategic CHRO — it's the person who can do all of that successfully and look like they belong in every one of those scenarios.