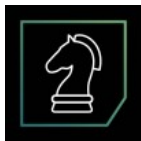




Kate Keyworth, Group People Director at HomeServe Plc



Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR.

"I'm Looking For People Who've Proven That They Can Deal With Ambiguity."

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Adam Bryant [in](#)

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

***Kate Keyworth**, group people director at Homeserve PLC, based in the UK, shared smart insights in our interview around*

the theme of accountability and ownership, including how HR should always take a hard look at itself in the mirror.

Q. How did you get into the field of HR in the first place?

A. I did a degree in psychology and just before my third year, my father said, “This is a fluffy degree. You’re going to have to do something proper.” He suggested HR, and at the time, he knew the HR director for Motorola in the UK. I did some work there and loved it. The field was just full of powerful women doing some cool stuff.

I did some post-grad work before starting full-time in HR in retail companies. Retail can be a tough environment because it’s low-margin and the industry has not always attracted the most sophisticated leaders. There was blatant nastiness, but it teaches you resilience. You learn a lot of coping strategies in those kinds of environments, because very often it’s about survival.

Q. What have you learned in your more senior HR roles?

A. The key thing is to be part of the solution, not the problem. I’ve met people in HR who like to sit on moral high ground and blame others, like line managers, for any problems in the company. But you have to ask yourself, “Have we enabled them? Have we given them the tools? Have we recognized that they have 50 things they have to do, and the problem is not that they’re incompetent?”

We need to avoid that type of pious judgment. Maybe HR is the

problem. Maybe the tools that we're giving them aren't good enough. Maybe the materials are too long-winded or we haven't explained them or they don't see any value in them. We need to hold the mirror up more often to ourselves, because people don't listen to us when we start criticizing. You have to take more control and ownership.

Q. When you move into a new role, you have to decide who's going to stay on your team. What's your approach?

A. I've always said to new leaders — and I have to do what I tell others — that they shouldn't come in and fire their team. It's the worst thing you can do. Nobody respects you. It's much better to try and work with what you have, within reason. Anyone can fire a team and bring in colleagues from their old job. I think it's a cop out. I've been doing this work forever and often the problem with an employee is equally shared by a failure of leadership. A person's failure to adapt is hardly ever 100 percent their fault.

Q. What leadership qualities carry the greatest premium for you?

A. I'm looking for people who've proven that they can deal with ambiguity and can operate outside their comfort zone in increasing areas of grayness. Somebody may be super in their current role, but it may be because it's the work they've always done and they're in control of that world. If everything isn't buttoned down, they start getting out of their comfort zone and it really shows.

"Your attitude defines your

altitude."

What's important is being able to make the transition from controlling everything to building out and operating a completely different model. There are people who can adapt to that and there are people who just freeze and start complaining. It's old-fashioned, but a former boss used to say that your attitude defines your altitude.

Q. I'd love to shift the conversation to you personally. What were early influences for you?

A. I grew up in a rural area. I'm an only child, and I always had the benefit of that. I'm hugely comfortable in my own company. Because I didn't have any brothers or sisters, I had to go out and make friends, so that was quite helpful in developing social skills.

I was always really active, and still am today, to the point that my husband sometimes says, "Can you not just sit down and relax?" I always need to be doing something. I probably need to tone that down a bit because life can pass you by. But I've always planned things and been action-oriented.

Q. And what about your parents? What did they do for work, and how have they influenced you?

A. My dad was an operations director, and my mother was a stay-at-home mum. Early on, she was a laboratory assistant and was very passionate about her work. After seventeen years at home, she had

trouble getting back into the workforce, and she didn't want that to happen to me.

*"If it's something you cannot
change, there is no point
dwelling on it."*

She said, "Katherine, you are going to keep your career when you have children. That's important. It defines you, and the older you get, the more you realize how important that is." I've been lucky because she has helped me do that, now that she lives with us and helps look after our children.

She's a very strong woman, very resilient and pragmatic. If she hears anyone complaining that life is unfair, she says that yes, life is unfair, but if it's something you cannot change, there is no point dwelling on it. When I was growing up, she would never let me stew. It was always, "It's happened, you learn from it and you move on." That has stayed with me.