



Judith Scimone



**X-Factor Leadership**

Powerful conversations with heads of talent and learning at leading corporations

# "What You Stand For Matters. That's A Huge Difference That We're Seeing."

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**David Reimer**

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*Exciting news: We are launching an interview series with top*

*leaders in the talent and learning field, sharing their key lessons on how to drive impact across their organizations. To kick off the series, we reached out to **Judith Scimone**, senior vice president and chief talent officer at MetLife, who shared smart insights on the art and science of talent assessment with me and my partner in this series, **Adam Bryant**, managing director at **The ExCo Group**.*

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

Scimone: I came by way of studying engineering and loving mechanical systems. After business school, I was working on some Six Sigma projects at GE, and started looking at how Six Sigma applied to HR. I was intrigued by how you look at the field through a systems lens. I've stayed with it since, and I've worked in HR as a business partner, a diversity lead and in other roles. What I love about talent is that it's at the intersection of so many disciplines.

**Reimer: It's interesting how you're bringing an analytical background to a field that involves human behavior, which is not always easy to predict or pin down.**

Scimone: Yes, because when you love math, you just want X to equal something, right? The challenge of this position, and it's a fun challenge, is that X equals three or it could equal five or it can equal seven. And that, for somebody with a math brain, is fascinating. The good news is that, especially in engineering and systems, you start to see patterns.

The challenge is that there's a lot that's unexplainable and you need to be comfortable with the discomfort of not knowing the right answer. You have to be comfortable experimenting. What I love about this work is that you have to have a point of view and test and learn at the same time.

The other thing I enjoy, and a technical background helps, is that the data truly is informative. It might not give us the answer, but it helps us as we flex to different situations because we have a foundational understanding of the situation. Scientists are willing to do that — to just say, that was wrong, so let's go over here.

**Bryant: Talk about how you're using data in the talent field.**

Scimone: It's both art and science. The science is not in finding the top people who exhibit the most important qualities, but rather in building a machine that can really move the best people through a talent system. The science is knowing what you need, knowing what you have, and to constantly be building and sustaining this talent machine.

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assess is key."*

The art for me is about assessments. Our ability to assess talent in general, formally and informally, is at the center of everything. It's at the center of making good decisions, eliminating bias and having better conversations internally. This fundamental ability to assess is key.

There's a lot more science to it, but you have to do it in an artistic way.

**Reimer: What do companies need more of from leaders now?**

Scimone: Leadership has become more personal. There shouldn't be a separation between who you are and what you do when it comes to leadership. That's always been a tricky topic, but until we get comfortable from a business standpoint that someone's leadership is personal, we're going to continue to have a hard time with things as serious and sensitive as race relations, social justice and even crisis management.

In those discussions, questions around what you believe and stand for are much more prominent, whether they be social or environmental. What you stand for matters. That's a huge difference that we're seeing now.

It's subtle, it's complex, and quite honestly, it's not something we've been comfortable dealing with because it is personal. In talent and HR, we've tried to be more algorithmic about thinking through what it takes to be a leader and what it takes to lead effectively through crisis.

**Bryant: On the topic of assessment, I always like to ask leaders this question: If you could only ask somebody one question in a job interview, and then decide whether to hire them or not based on their answer, what would that one question be?**

Scimone: When have you had to risk personal gain to stand behind

what you believed? What did you do when faced with that situation? By the time we're talking to people for senior roles, we know that they're intellectual powerhouses, they can deliver and they can lead large teams. But what's in their hearts and what values are they willing to act on? Those are the things I want to know, especially when times get tough.

**Bryant: And how would you answer the question?**

Scimone: I value integrity, and I read somewhere that it's about alignment between calling and conduct – when the way you behave is aligned with what you're doing. I value anything that promotes equity and access and fairness.

**Reimer: How do you think about the art of influence in this role?**

Scimone: The biggest lesson has been "show, don't tell." Some aspects of this field are just airy-fairy to most people. So you have to find creative ways to demonstrate value quickly because nothing works faster in terms of influencing. But you can't always do that.

Sometimes the proof of concept of what we do is longer than a year, and by then, people have forgotten about you. So I would say have a point of view and share it quickly and test it quickly. And spend a lot less time telling and preaching. By adding value, other leaders in the company will start sharing the same messages.

**Bryant: What is your advice to HR on how to best work with**

**boards?**

Scimone: Think more about what the board is concerned about than about what you want to say. If I'm a board member and you're talking about succession, I want to know, most importantly, that we're going to be okay if any of these top people leave. The charts are one thing, but what are we going to do realistically?

Where are we at risk if people leave? What's the risk to our culture if we're not racially, ethnically and gender diverse? Just answer the question that they're most concerned about as opposed to feeling like you need to go through everything you've ever done. Don't try to boil the ocean for a board.

**Reimer: What influenced you most early on in your life that shaped who you are as a leader?**

Scimone: My mother taught me how to multiply myself. How do you find the biggest levers and pull them? Don't waste your time on the small stuff. That was huge because it allows me to multiply my leadership, and that was a pretty important thing, especially as an individual contributor for a long time. How do you get this done without beating your head against the wall?

**Bryant: How have conversations around racial injustice this year influenced your leadership approach?**

Scimone: After George Floyd was killed, our CEO had an all-hands

meeting. I was supposed to be on this all-hands call to talk about something related to talent. I was new to the company, and I wasn't sure what people would be comfortable hearing, but I felt I had to say something.

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I started the conversation talking about experiences I've had, like being followed around in stores, and being told, "We don't want you in our neighborhood." All sorts of things that happen every day. That was a big test of leadership for me because, again, that's where it became personal. I couldn't PowerPoint that one.

That's when it was really about showing up in all of my humanity, in all of my Blackness, and saying, "Here's who I am, here's how this made me feel," and to do it in a way to help steer the organization in a hopeful, positive, active direction. That was a huge deal for me.

**Reimer: That's a powerful story. Stepping back, what has been your reaction to all the commitments by companies to do more in the wake of the killing of George Floyd?**

Scimone: I think it's going to require all of us who lead – regardless of your race – to really take a hard look at ourselves and what we believe and what we don't believe, and being really honest about that and

willing to shift some things.

There are some deep systemic changes that need to happen – some fundamental and a long time coming. This is not going to be solved through one initiative or event. We need to take steps to solve this for society. If there's just one thing we're going to be able to do in our workplaces to change it, all I can point to is that leaders are going to have to get really personal to solve it.

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