



Joe Garbus

### **X-Factor Leadership**

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# **A Key HR Challenge: Knowing What Is "Real" Vs. What Is "Contextually Real."**

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**David Reimer**

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*For the next installment of our interview series with top leaders*

*in the talent and learning field, we spoke with **Joe Garbus**, chief talent and inclusion officer at Marsh, who shared smart insights and key lessons with me and my colleague **Adam Bryant**, managing director at **The ExCo Group**.*

**Reimer: In your role, you operate at the intersection of art and science. How do you think about balancing those two?**

Garbus: We have to be really smart in our line of work about what is real and what is contextually real. There's a lot of data and science, but then there's the art of extrapolating that science into the context of your workplace. Many people love to throw around academic and consulting research, but I'm very suspicious about a lot of the shiny objects that our field loves to go after.

I've become a little harder-edged about really pressing on the science. What do we really know, and how does what we really know then influence what I'm going to say to business leaders to help them be more successful within the context of the decisions they have to make? How are they going to make that decision differently based on what I might share with them?

The other thing that's kept us really honest is that analytics and data quality have improved so much in recent years. They can provide a good start for pressure-testing ideas inside of an organization. Even so, there's a lot that we don't know that will be dependent on the culture of the organization.

**Bryant: What's your framework for thinking about how to support the business agenda but also drive the talent agenda?**

Garbus: How can we help the business go further, faster by building better quality talent faster? To that end, we have to get as close as we can to the P&L decisions to establish credibility to say to a business leader, "I'd like to show you a picture that you might not be familiar with so that when you're making decisions about people, capabilities, and growth, you can benefit from that expertise."

That's what you're paying me for. There is a balance of being respectful and credible but not being quiet about bringing views to the table. I always have a theory of the case in everything I do, particularly when it comes to talent.

**Reimer: Are there talent or leadership trends you're seeing right now that are more important than they were a few years ago?**

Garbus: Work-life integration and the power of conversations at every scale. We're finding through pulse surveys across the organization that people are connecting more and in more personal ways. There's an informality to doing business now that we didn't have before because of how people are engaging with each other.

Because of that, people are seeing the importance of the frequency, quality and authenticity of conversations. Conversation is the basic unit of work in an organization at every scale — individual, team, function, enterprise — and the more effective and higher-quality those

conversations are, the more lots of good things happen.

*Conversation is the basic unit  
of work in an organization.*

And so it's back to the future. We have realized the importance of the manager's role, including coaching, feedback, delegation, prioritization and goal-setting. It's about creating the space for performance and growth.

We're spending a lot of time emphasizing that role to people — this is what we expect of them in terms of capabilities, and here's how to do it and how to get better at it. That said, we also want to create an environment where people are driving their own career, in terms of their ambitions and their needs.

**Bryant: What have been the key lessons for you on how to do this role successfully?**

Garbus: There are a few foundational ideas. Again, understand how to help the organization go further, faster. Go spend time in the line organization and really learn the business. If you can speak the language of the business and finance, which are the levers that drive decision-making, then you're going to be a few steps ahead.

The first thing I do in every job is meet with key senior leaders and ask them, "If you have to make really difficult decisions, what's driving

those decisions? What are you worried about? What gets you most excited?” Then you start to understand how the money flows through the organization and where they need to spend time on capital allocation and decision rights.

*Smart means meaningful and substantive, simple means digestible and doable.*

The next is understanding the importance of simple and smart. If you want to create behavior change, and if you want to build better quality talent faster, you need to go at it very simply and very smartly. And simply means truly simple, with plans that include no more than a few memorable bullet points.

It means holding training sessions that only cover one topic for 30 minutes. You have to make it digestible so people can say, “I get what you’re saying and now I can do something with that.” The smart part is about making sure that you have a lot of science and logic behind the point of view you’re promoting. Smart means meaningful and substantive, simple means digestible and doable.

**Reimer: You’ve worked in different companies and industries over the course of your career. What do senior executives struggle with most?**

Garbus: Dysfunctional ambition. It’s stunning to me how many senior

leaders are still filled with ambition and ego needs around things like their title. They may have arrived financially so that, even if they get fired, they'll never have to work again. And yet they're not taking risks, they're not being courageous, and they're not saying things out loud that I know they believe.

Second is that they can't connect dots, meaning they don't know the levers of the business and the cause and effect of pulling different levers, whether it's financial, people issues or external factors.

**Reimer: How do you think about return on investment of your learning and development efforts?**

Garbus: I think of it in terms of return on expectation. What does success look like in this area that you're investing in? What are you trying to achieve? For example, cybersecurity is an enormously important part of the risk market right now. How are you acquiring talent and building capabilities in that area?

We want our leaders to understand it, and we want our people to have the technical competence to deliver those capabilities. We're going to make it happen by doing an integrated plan, which is not just training and development. It's about pulling multiple levers: hiring, retention, mobility, reward, and development.

**Bryant: What are the X-factors that separate the best employees from everyone else?**

Garbus: There are a few. They are adults with clear perspective on the relative importance of any issue. They have a certain amount of agility, meaning they pivot well and fast. They get right to the heart of an issue, and derive meaning quickly.

They know the relative importance of a situation, and they know how to weigh those situations in terms of importance. They have a strong network. They know how to rely on the right people at the right time.

### *How do you derive meaning from gray?*

Ambiguity management is also a crucial skill. Most things are gray, so how do you derive meaning from gray, and are you comfortable and confident in navigating the gray? Another X-factor is being able to take the complex and make it simple, and then create a simple narrative to help communicate the message.

**Reimer: What were important influences that really shaped who you are today?**

Garbus: I didn't grow up with a lot, so the notion of security is really important to me. No one's going to starve in this house if I lose my job, but that doesn't stop me from worrying every day that life could change and that it's very fragile.

Later in life, I had throat cancer. There was a particularly memorable

day in 2010 after my treatment. I had chemo and radiation and surgery. It had been a rough summer. I was at the train station to head back into the office in New York for the first time and I was feeling weak and sorry for myself. I was still using a feeding tube to eat.

Then I walked up the stairs near the train station, and there's a rattling noise at the ticket machine. It was a blind man trying to get his ticket out of the machine and I had to assist him. Moments like that really put things in perspective and cause you to question the stories you tell yourself about your circumstances compared to some other people. I was very grateful for that moment.

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