



Piyush Mehta, CHRO at Genpact



Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR.

"It's Important That People See You As Being Transparent And Trustworthy."

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***Piyush Mehta**, the chief human resources officer at Genpact, shared his key leadership lessons with me and my colleague, **David Reimer**, CEO of **The ExCo Group**.*

Reimer: What are the leadership skills that you are valuing more highly as a result of the crisis of the past year?

Mehta: They have not changed for us. A few years ago, we decided that curiosity, humility and learning agility were the most important things that we needed in our people. They would be the foundation on which we build our organization. Our view was that the future is very hard to predict and therefore we need people who can look around corners.

No single person has all the answers. And the answers today are not going to be relevant one or two years from now. The half-life of most skills is two to four years. That creates a compelling need to bring in and develop people who are curious and who will learn and unlearn every day. That worked really well for us in the tough circumstances of the pandemic.

Bryant: How did you operationalize that approach in terms of hiring?

Mehta: Traditionally, experience tends to be the measure of the capability a person brings to the table. So we decided to do an experiment. We would hire 100 of the smartest people we could find based on “learnability.” We wanted great communication skills and raw intelligence. We would be age- and experience-agnostic. We would look inside and outside the organization.

We went to some of the best universities across the world. Why would they want to come and work for us when they might have an opportunity to work for some of the biggest investment banks and consulting companies? Because we would give them roles that we would typically give to people with 15 years of experience. And today, many of these people are in some of the most important roles in the company.

Reimer: If you were interviewing someone to check if they have those qualities you mentioned, how would the conversation go?

Mehta: We’ll ask people about how they’ve approached projects they worked on. How broad was their thinking? How were they able to connect the dots? We also get them to talk about something they’re passionate about. You’d be surprised how easily curiosity and learning agility comes through when you get them talking about a topic that is important to them.

It’s an amazingly simple way to assess learning agility. How have people made mistakes in

their choices? How open are they to owning up to them? You get to understand how and what they have learned. This is not about forced humility. Humility and curiosity and learning go together.

Bryant: What is your advice to first-time CHROs?

Mehta: Many HR organizations focus too much on the soft and fuzzy stuff, aren't able to speak the business language, and therefore they end up as a silo in the organization. How does the company make money? What is our competitive advantage? How do we sustain it? The ability to understand all of these questions becomes important.

Once you understand the business, it becomes clear how to add value. At Genpact, we do that by ensuring that we have the talent we need when we need it, at the right price and place. It's about making sure that the talent supply chain works. My engine to develop talent has to be best in class, because I cannot sustain buying talent on an ongoing basis. And if I do that well, I will be able to move up internal talent faster, which will create loyalty and reduce attrition.

You have to lay out the facts and say, "This is the way it is."

Finally, HR people often get associated with political dynamics in the organization. It's important to remain relatively free from engaging in those. I often have been in situations that involve sensitive discussions. What has helped me is that people see me as being transparent and not having a political agenda.

You have to lay out the facts and say, "This is the way it is. You may not agree with the interpretation of the facts, but if these are the facts, how would you react to them?" And when you make people partners in decisions, it leads to a better outcome. It's important that people see you as being transparent and trustworthy. That's not learned overnight, and that doesn't come with your title.

Reimer: What was an important early lesson for you that shaped your leadership

style?

Mehta: Our previous CEO was also our founder, Pramod Bhasin. He is a tough, charismatic guy. He grew up in the Jack Welch environment at GE, and he built Genpact from the ground up. In 2005, I was in an HR role that was three levels down from the CHRO — a junior role.

The company has regular operating reviews with 40 or 50 people in the room, and Pramod would often rip people to shreds. My boss and his boss were away so they told me to go to one of the meetings. They were discussing some mistake that had been made from a people perspective, and everyone in the room agreed that decisive action should be taken against the individuals involved.

I was sitting in a corner and I said, “Maybe we should find out a little more first.” Everybody turned to look at me. Half of them didn’t know who I was, and everyone was wondering why I was even opening my mouth. I said, “Look, we don’t really know what happened, so before we take action, I can go check it out myself first.”

It was a lesson for me about the importance of speaking up.

I had to drive five hours to Jaipur where the incident happened. It turned out the employees who were being blamed were just acting on what their manager told them. So now I had to call Pramod — I was shaking like a leaf — and I told him what happened. He said, “Fine, just go do what you want.” And he hung up.

I had no idea if he was angry with me. One month later, I was invited to a dinner that Pramod had at his house every few months for 100 leaders of the company. I was standing in a corner and Pramod walked up to me and said, “Look, I’m going to give you a big job.” One month later, he promoted me two levels into the CHRO role.

Later on, I asked him why he gave me the job, given that he had interacted with me just once. He said, “I heard good things about you and I needed someone to be able to stand up

to me in the right way. I can be very overwhelming. I can be very hard on people, and I don't want someone who's scared." It was a lesson for me about the importance of speaking up.