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## Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR.

# "We're Living An Experiment, And It's Forced Us All To Be Agile."

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Adam Bryant [fluencer](#)

**Helena Gottschling**, chief human resources officer at the Royal Bank of Canada (RBC), shared her key leadership lessons with me and my colleague, **David Reimer**, CEO of *The ExCo Group*.

**Reimer: What are the top few lessons you've learned in this role that you would pass along to aspiring CHROs?**

Gottschling: During your first twelve months, spend time with employees at all levels, not just the senior leadership team, to gain a deeper understanding of the culture across the organization and what's on employees' minds. Try to get that information unfiltered because the more senior you are in an organization, the more filtered the information is that's coming to you.

It's imperative that you take the time to learn the business, particularly the parts of the business that you haven't had exposure to in the past. Spend time with leaders to understand their business context and strategy, and how talent fits into that overall strategy.

**Bryant: How is the reality of the role different than what you expected?**

Gottschling: I worked closely with the former CHRO for about eight years before stepping into this role so I had a pretty good feel for it. What's different, and it is nuanced, is how context can so quickly change what your priorities need to be.

Within months of me taking on the role, the #MeToo movement became front and center, and I quickly became the advisor to the CEO and the board on how to respond when – like many organizations – we had more employees speaking up.

*The problem-solving nature of this role is just fascinating.*

More recently, we had one of our senior leaders transitioning as a transgender individual, and there too I was advising the CEO and the head of that business division about what we needed to do to support that leader.

When the pandemic hit, I became the chief health and safety officer. We're living an experiment, and it's forced us all to be agile and to make decisions despite all of the uncertainty.

**Reimer: Given that notion of “living an experiment” — which I think is how this past year has felt for most of us — how do you and the CEO help the board of directors understand what’s happening within the culture?**

Gottschling: We spend a lot of time in the board HR committee on the talent agenda, and that helps provide them exposure to our talent. Pre-COVID, we actually did quite a few board “get-to-knows” with directors and employees, without the leadership team present.

We've also done a lot of work in the conduct and culture space with the governance committee — not just on the elements of culture that make us great, but also on the elements of culture that would be watch-outs for the board.

The chief risk officer and I chair an enterprise conduct council where each of our businesses and segments are required to do a conduct and culture report based on a framework that we've developed. We look at complaints, reputational risk issues, and we do a deep dive on employee conduct and highlight any common themes that emerge.

**Bryant: You went to business school, and then into banking, where numbers reliably add up on a spreadsheet. But the HR function deals with the infinite complexity of human beings. Have you always been comfortable in the gray areas?**

Gottschling: One of my favorite courses in business school was organizational development. It was about what makes a company tick and how you structure and organize work and people. If you lead well, you get the discretionary effort from your employees.

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Once in a while, there's a very clear right or wrong answer. But more often than not, you're dealing with so many variables and you have to really understand context. The problem-solving nature of this role is just fascinating.

I want people to feel that the work that they do has meaning, that they have impact, that they can trust the organization they work for, and see the organization's values coming through. Relationships across the organization are what makes this job so interesting.

**Reimer: If you were a director at a company and assessing CHRO candidates, what qualities would you look for? What questions would you ask?**

Gottschling: If you assume the person has the necessary technical skills, I would try to understand what makes them tick. I'd craft a few questions to get underneath how they approach problem solving.

I'd ask them to share one of the most challenging situations they've ever dealt with and why it was challenging and how they stepped through it. I'd want to get a sense of their motivation — where do they get their energy from? What is it that makes them love what they do?

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Not everyone can do HR. You have to depersonalize so many issues in the course of a week, such as deciding how much money the company should be paying someone who could be making a lot more than the CHRO. If you're too ambitious with your own career, it could impact your judgment.

I'm ambitious, but my career aspiration can't get in the way of doing what's right for the company. It's about finding that balance between treating employees fairly but also recognizing the impact to the shareholder. It becomes a little bit more of an art and less of a science.

**Bryant: How do you think about planning and incentivizing employees when there is so much uncertainty?**

Gottschling: We have had to reset a lot of our goals over the past year, and we are really focusing on the work and its impact. What were the outcomes that people achieved? Because there might be people who work really hard but they're not that productive. And it's up to us to help leaders align the work to goals and outcomes.

This effort started pre-Covid, but we don't talk about performance management now. We talk about performance enablement. It's not about a mid-year review and a year-end review. It's about your overall performance enablement journey. It's about having regular routines with your managers so that you're getting feedback on the work that you're doing.

It's about ensuring that you do a check-in mid-year to see how you're progressing against those goals or whether those goals should be reset. We wanted to change the focus to emphasize that the leader has a role to play in enabling people to be the best they can be.

**Reimer: What were early influences that really shaped who you are, and helped prepare you for this role?**

Gottschling: I was a middle child, with two older and two younger siblings. I did quite a bit of mediation with my siblings, so that helped. And I've always been very balanced. If I had an out-and-out argument with my mother, within two hours I'd be going to her saying, "Look, I'm sorry. Let's just talk this through."

I'm also pretty dogged. If I believe in something, I will stick to my guns and go back more than once if it's something I really believe in. And I'm very good at compartmentalizing. I'm not a person who holds a grudge.

I'm someone who just wants to try to resolve it and look forward and not look back. That characteristic helps in this role because you can have some tough conversations, you can agree to disagree, but you don't personalize it. It's about how you get to a constructive place where you can look forward.