



Arnold Dhanesar



**X-Factor Leadership**

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📧 Biweekly newsletter

## "We're Looking For Leaders Who Can Solve Rubik's Cubes At Light Speed"

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**David Reimer**

CEO - The ExCo Group

*For the next installment of our interview series with top leaders in the talent and learning field, we spoke with **Arnold Dhanesar**, group chief talent officer at Zurich Insurance, who shared his smart insights and key lessons with me and my colleague **Adam Bryant**, managing director at **The ExCo Group**.*

**Reimer: How did you end up in the talent field in the first place?**

Dhanesar: I am a 4th-generation Indian, living in the USA, but I was born in South Africa and grew up under apartheid. This really set the foundation for the work that I'm doing today. My dad also lost his flourishing business because it was based in a white area.

Because of apartheid, I couldn't go to the same colleges as my white friends or be in the same sports teams as them. When I graduated with a bachelor's degree, I was declined roles because of my ethnic and racial diversity. That led me to pursue my post-graduate studies with a master's in industrial and organizational psychology. Growing up with discrimination in South Africa motivated me to do the work I'm doing today, which is focused on helping all talent achieve their full potential.

**Bryant: How have you seen the talent field evolve?**

Dhanesar: One big change I've seen in talent practices is around work sustainability and upskilling and reskilling of the workforce. That wasn't such a big factor ten years ago, but due to rapid digitization of businesses and automation of roles, it is imperative for every business to have an upskilling plan for their workforce to remain competitive.

We've even embedded this into our new purpose statement, which is to "create a brighter future together." We really want to have a shared commitment and a sense of security in the workplace where all individuals are allowed to grow. Part of the work-sustainability commitments are about providing psychological safety to our employees.

We want to develop them for new job opportunities rather than hiring from the outside. It's about prioritizing the in-house skills versus outsourcing for talent and skills that we don't have.

*Skills are fast becoming the new currency in organizations.*

Another big change in the talent space is the hybrid models of work that we have today — whether it's remote work due to the pandemic or thinking about a different workforce strategy when we do go back to the offices. Skills are fast becoming the new currency in organizations. That gives us a taxonomy for thinking about careers, and how individuals can acquire new skills for jobs that don't even exist today.

**Reimer: How do you think about the balance between the company's responsibility to build careers and the responsibility of individual employees?**

Dhanesar: A few years back, before work sustainability became a big movement, we always said that you are the CEO of your career. You manage your career or someone else will, and you may not like the way they manage it. I have changed my point of view on that and now see that it's a three-pronged responsibility.

One is, yes, the individual must own their career and must be a willing participant. But there are two other stakeholders in this equation. One is the company's role to provide individuals with career opportunities and the upskilling funding behind that.

The third stakeholder is our managers. Managers really need to also own this practice, and they can excel by becoming better coaches and better mentors. You can think of it as a stool with three legs, and this won't work if any one of those legs are not in place.

**Bryant: How are you making sure your talent aligns with the strategy?**

Dhanesar: It takes a lot of commitment at all levels of the organization, starting with the board and ExCo. We implemented a practice called strategic talent reviews to ensure that we are constantly reviewing if we have the talent with the right capabilities, skillset and mindset to deliver the strategy. Our goal is to improve our succession bench strength for critical roles through refreshed success profiles and matching talent.

Over the last three years, we've improved our succession bench, so more internal hires are being promoted to roles instead of filling them with external hires. We continue to go outside and bring in fresh perspectives and new thinking, but that shouldn't be more than roughly 20 percent.

**Reimer: What are the key X-factors you're looking for in finding and building leaders?**

Dhanesar: Given that we are living through the first global social experiment of working virtually leads me to think that X-factors of leadership are different in this environment. We're looking for leaders who are agile enough to navigate digital transformations in virtual working environments as well as evolving external environments and who can empathize with their workforce.

Another way to think of it is that we are looking for leaders who can solve Rubik's cubes at light speed. They're basically trying to solve a Rubik's cube in one hand, and then they'll have another Rubik's cube to solve in the next hour, and on it goes. You have to have leaders who are good problem solvers, who are innovative, who have this executive agility that we are looking for.

*There's no power in knowledge anymore for  
leaders because it is freely available.*

Another X-factor is "open-source leadership," a term used by [Rajeev Peshawaria](#) in his book with the same title. He talks about the fact that for the first time in history, knowledge is freely available, and there are no boundaries. So there's no power in knowledge anymore for leaders because it is freely available. So can leaders embrace this new environment with purpose and empathy instead?

**Bryant: What's your framework for testing the right amount and speed of change within an organization at a time when many people are feeling overwhelmed?**

Dhanesar: Context matters, so really understand the context of your organization and where it is. You cannot push too much through a small hole all at the same time, especially when so many of us are spending significant hours a day in front of a screen.

And you really need to understand the maturity of an organization. You can design highly sophisticated talent tools, but no one's going to apply them if the maturity of the

organization is low. Can your line managers absorb and implement what you're developing?

**Reimer: What have been the most important leadership lessons for you?**

Dhanesar: That question takes me back to my time growing up in South Africa. The early influences definitely came through leaders like Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi. These value-based leadership ideas have stuck with me.

I was in South Africa when Nelson Mandela was still in jail, and we were part of the Free Nelson Mandela movements. Then he was released, and everyone thought there was going to be chaos in the country, but there wasn't. Instead, there was a peaceful transition because he knew he had to forgive, and if he did that, everyone else would follow.

At the end of the day, we all have to make choices, and one of my lessons was that the choices we make are the most profound indicator of who we are. The choices you make matter, and I'm reminded of that every day when I see people being excluded.

In those situations, it really is up to each of us to make a difference and to call it out. Because if we don't do that as leaders, how can we expect others who are not in those positions of influence to do the same?

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