



Susan LaMonica, CHRO and head of corporate social responsibility at Citizens Financial Group



Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR.

📅 Biweekly newsletter

"We Need Leaders Who Are Leaning In To Try To Reimagine The Future"

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Adam Bryant [in](#)

Managing Director at The ExCo Group (formerly Merryck & Co. Americas)

***Susan LaMonica**, chief human resources officer and head of corporate social responsibility at Citizens Financial Group, shared her key leadership lessons with me and my colleague, **David Reimer**, CEO of **The ExCo Group**, in the latest installment of our **Strategic CHRO interview series**.*

Reimer: You came to HR after spending many years in roles that were more about operations, risk management and capital markets. How does that background inform how you approach the job today?

LaMonica: Having that solid foundation helped me understand the challenges that many of our business and functional leaders face in managing and leading their teams and sourcing and retaining talent. Being in charge of a bank branch for a year also taught me the importance of getting all of our support systems aligned to ensure that the frontline employees could effectively serve our customers.

I saw what happened when you didn't have that alignment. In those situations where you're organizationally removed from the mothership, a lot of things might not make sense to the frontline workers, so people are checking the boxes, but they're not understanding the

broader context.

So a critical lesson I took from that experience is how important context and alignment is. You have to work really hard to ensure that people are joined up and rallying around a common vision and purpose.

Bryant: Given the broad responsibilities of the CHRO role, what is your framework for doing the job?

LaMonica: It's really all about culture, talent, and leadership. If you can get those three things right, they are the keys to the kingdom. And the one that you really have to get right, because it drives the other two, is leadership.

If you select the right leaders, if you hold them to account for the right things, that's going to solve for a lot of the challenges that any organization will face. Strong leaders figure it out, they make it happen and they set the tone, which really helps drive the culture.

What are the outcomes that we focus on, for our financials, our customers, and employee sentiment? Are we able to attract and retain good talent? We need leaders who are leaning in to trying to reimagine the future, so they can get ahead of it.

And this is the beauty of being a mid-sized company. We're not a 300,000-person behemoth. With 18,000 employees, you can get your arms around things, and make sure there is a consistent thread through our messaging, development, and education.

Reimer: How do you think about efforts to promote diversity and inclusion?

LaMonica: It's not simple. The problem is that people have viewed it as a program when in fact it's about fixing systems. It goes back to my point around alignment. If we want to drive toward a desired outcome, whatever that outcome is, it's not one-dimensional.

When you start to talk about things like diversity, you need a systems response.

When you start to talk about things like diversity, you need a systems response. You've got to look at all elements of the system to understand where things are breaking down. How do we select talent? How do we identify emerging talent and give them the breadth of experiences and exposure to put them on the path that's going to get them into some of these more senior level roles? How do we ensure that we've got leaders and managers who are creating that inclusive environment? There are a number of levers that we have to pull.

Bryant: What are the muscles that your leaders built during the pandemic that you hope they will carry into the future?

LaMonica: Our leaders had to lead differently when the crisis hit. What made them successful is that they were authentic, and they made themselves vulnerable. They were transparent, communicative, and they took the time to get to know their team at a different level. So one lesson we take forward is the power of authentic leadership and high degrees of empathy and vulnerability and how that can really ignite people.

The other thing that became quite clear to us is we have a lot of limiting beliefs, and many of them were just blown away through the pandemic. Did we think it was possible to move 400 contact-center agents home within two weeks? The manager who has responsibility for that area said that in normal times, even if we were hustling, it would have taken us six months.

What became clear is that a lot of things that we might think could never be done can in fact be done. People have reflected on that and have said, how many times do we limit the potential of our people and the organization? Because of what we did over the last year, we can now remind people that more is possible.

Reimer: One aspect of the CHRO job that you can't train for is interacting with the board. What advice can you share on that?

LaMonica: The relationship with the CEO, the C-suite, and the board is absolutely critical. If any of those relationships are broken, it's very hard to imagine how you can be successful. With the board in particular, the key is to be very transparent.

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You need to be able to call things as they are. Sometimes you've got to say what's not popular, and sometimes you have to be the lone voice in the room to hold a mirror up to the organization. What the board appreciates is a straight shooter and somebody who can call a spade a spade. I don't know how you train for that, honestly.

Bryant: There's an additional challenge for the CHRO on the leadership team, as well. You're a peer, but you're also there to help judge their performance.

LaMonica: Inevitably, if you're in a role like this long enough, you're going to hit speed bumps and there will be times when there are going to be disagreements or when you've got issues with one of the C-suite executives that you have to deal with.

Navigating those moments is clearly an art, not a science. Some people are really good at it, and some people just fumble. There are a lot of landmines you've got to step around. It all comes down to trust.

Reimer: What were important early influences for you?

LaMonica: You have to be comfortable in your own skin, because a lot of things that I do make other people look good, and that's okay. I think some of that has its roots in growing up with this broader sense that the world is bigger than me. And those messages from my parents were never overt. It was just how they led their lives.

I also grew up playing a lot of sports. I love being part of a team. Often I rose to be the leader of the team, but I also could work as a member of the team quite effectively.

It was drilled into me when I was growing up that what's most important is giving back and investing in people around you. So that always was very much a part of my DNA. I think people who are most successful in these roles are somewhat selfless because it's not necessarily about you being out in front and leading.

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