



Sandra Ozola, global head of human capital at KKR & Co.



Strategic CHRO

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"Resiliency Is Built Over A Lifetime. It Doesn't Happen In A Training Course."

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Sandra Ozola, global head of human capital at KKR & Co., shared her key leadership lessons with me and my colleague, David Reimer, CEO of The ExCo Group, in our latest Strategic CHRO interview.

Reimer: The last 18 months have brought so many challenges to the CHRO's table. What in your background prepared you to be able to handle so many headwinds?

Ozola: There is a certain level of resiliency that has been required in the role, with challenges that include employee safety and wellbeing, running the talent organization, continuously recruiting and onboarding people so that they feel they are highly productive members of the team, helping with new leadership and management behaviors, and prioritizing what deserves attention.

The resiliency is built over a lifetime. It doesn't happen in a training course. It happens by being exposed to certain types of difficulties in your life that help you develop that muscle. For me, there are a couple of layers that strengthened my resiliency.

Growing up as part of the former Soviet Union was one of them. But it was really sports that strengthened that muscle for me, physically, mentally, and emotionally. I was part of the Latvia handball team and was living in a sports boarding school. We were training very, very hard, living in the regime where the coaches are allowed to yell at you if you're not having a good game.

When I started my career in Latvia, I had no idea what I wanted to do, and I didn't have any particularly deep interests. I could speak English, and my first job was to translate annual reports from Latvian into English. And then the bank I worked for was acquired by a bigger bank, and the new CEO told me they wanted me to become the head of human resources, and I had to ask what that was.

I didn't know what the function is and what it does, and the CEO just said, "You'll figure it out." I made a lot of mistakes along the way, but I have that ability to reflect and be introspective, which is also one of the key characteristics I'm looking for when I interview candidates. I want to understand their level of reflection and introspection, which will enable them to do their jobs well later on.

All of that is a long story, but that has certainly helped develop that resiliency muscle that no job is too small, and when the stress comes, you deal with it.

Bryant: One of the many nuanced challenges of your role is being a part of the team while also keeping a bit of distance to ensure you're being as objective as possible. How do you think about that?

Ozola: It is a very fine line to walk. One critical approach is to have that enterprise-wide thinking, rather than focusing narrowly on specific teams or only the people who generate revenue or the most senior leaders. And part of that challenge is having a kind of mirror that you look at every day to ask yourself, is what I am seeing true?

That's the first question I'm always asking whenever I face tricky situations: where is the truth? Keeping as much objectivity as possible in situations that are often very subjective is not easy.

There are also fundamental questions to keep in mind. What is a business? It's an organized human service, and it's the role of the CHRO to organize that service, and that involves three broad categories. One is organizational design. The second is setting the right talent strategy for the teams, and that includes skill sets and capabilities for both the present and the future; leadership behaviors; talent acquisition, retention and development; and diversity, equality, and inclusion.

If you get all these underlying systems right, culture is an output of all of it.

The third one is all the systems that you build to make those pieces work together. Every organization is a living system, and one of the biggest mistakes that I think our profession makes is focusing narrowly on programs rather than focusing on the underlying systems that drive business results.

This is where having the right performance management system comes in, so that your incentive and compensation plans are incentivizing and driving the right behaviors. And how you manage all of that together is what creates the culture. People often talk about how culture is so

important, but they don't talk enough about what is forming the culture. If you get all these underlying systems right, culture is an output of all of it.

Reimer: That's a key insight. How did you come to appreciate its importance?

Ozola: I started my career working in large banks, and I watched how their human capital organizations worked. They were rolling out so many programs, such as the next leadership model or performance management system with 27 different competencies to measure people on.

But nobody was really looking at how or even whether that was driving value. It was almost like justifying your job by rolling out so many new programs. There are these outputs, but no one was really looking at whether we are getting better results, or retaining more people, or whether people were happier.

I thought a lot about this when I moved to KKR because there was a high opportunity cost if you focus on the wrong things. And the deal teams and investors also pushed our thinking as my team started to grow by asking for the ROI on a new initiative. They would ask, why are you bringing me this new training program that I have zero time for? How is that going to add value? Asking that question in everything we do is very important.

Bryant: What have been some other influences that really shaped

you as a leader?

Ozola: Being comfortable with being uncomfortable is an increasingly important skill as you move up. The more responsibility you have, the more of a critical skill it becomes. And one of the ways how I'm training it right now is I'm part of a Navy SEALs leadership development program, which is quite fun and hard. There is a physical aspect to it, but it's more about leadership and mental toughness and reflection points. Being on that journey has been a real growth opportunity and quite transformational.

Another approach where I see a lot of value is that my best ideas have always come not when I'm meeting with other HR people, but from reading a marketing story or study on consumer behavior in completely different fields and then trying to see the patterns and connect the dots to how that idea would transfer to human capital. That's been hugely helpful, particularly when you think about organizations now developing this kind of end-to-end employee experience right from Day 1 all the way through to alumni.

*When you go talk to people,
put your notebook away.*

The other thing, which is very basic and which I learned quite early on, is that when you go talk to people, put your notebook away because the worst thing for HR people is to come in with your big notebook and not look people in the eye and just take notes. You lose the conversation

immediately. I also learned from a mentor the art of asking the second and third follow-up questions to get at the truth beyond the first response.

Finally, develop your business acumen, but you have to pair that with great storytelling. One thing I completely underestimated early on is the importance of regular storytelling and marketing and communication, because people never live in an information vacuum; they just make up their own truth, and that truth is often not the truth.

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