



Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR.

HR Has A Role To Play In Teaching People How To Make Difficult Decisions

Published on April 13, 2022



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Harsha Jalihal, chief people officer at MongoDB, shared her key leadership lessons with me and my colleague, David Reimer, CEO of The ExCo Group, in our latest Strategic CHRO interview.

Reimer: What are the leadership muscles that you've built over the last two years that you want to take forward with you?

Jalihal: The biggest muscle for me personally is about leading when our personal and professional lives have started to merge and blur. That line was blurring before, but the pandemic basically obliterated it completely. That changes the way we think about managing our people when external factors are showing up at work, and it requires a very different leadership muscle.

The other one is navigating ambiguity, and being comfortable with saying I don't know, and I don't have an answer for you. It's not a muscle that leaders were taught at, say, the GE school of leadership. It's hard for a lot of people to stand up and say, I don't know.

Bryant: What is it about your background, your DNA, that makes you able to not only survive in this environment but even thrive in it?

Jalihal: I was born and raised in India, and also lived in Europe and the United States during my formative years. That gave me a real global perspective on many things about life and culture and how people view

work and how people interact with each other.

One of the things I like about being in HR is that if you look at any complicated business problem in a company and start to unpack it, it eventually boils down to human behavior. That is why CPOs and CHROs are suddenly in greater demand — we bring to the table an understanding of human behavior. I always tell my team that there's no better time than now to be in HR because you can really influence an organization.

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now to be in HR.*

The last thing that helps me respond to these challenging times is that one of the biggest leadership lessons I've learned is to recognize what my triggers are. What frustrates me? What motivates me? What inspires me? What makes me mad? What makes me impatient? For a leader, particularly in a role like mine, that has helped me stay sane, because it helps me manage them more effectively.

Reimer: Can we ask the obvious question: What are your triggers?

Jalihal: A few things really make me frustrated. I'm impatient by nature, and when things are not moving at pace, I tend to get agitated, and I will show up a little grumpy and cranky in meetings, and I've learned to manage that. I've learned to use techniques that allow me to step away, whether that's mindfulness techniques or taking the dog for

a walk. One of the benefits of working from home is that it is easier to step away from a situation. In the past, when we were all in the office together, we're kind of in each other's faces, and it's harder to control an impulse there.

Another trigger for me is when people assume that you know what another person wants or what they are thinking. One of my jobs as a CPO is to recognize that we have 3,500 very distinct human beings in this company who have very specific points of view. I'm not foolish enough to think that we can find a solution that satisfies all 3,500 people, but I do recognize that multiple points of view have to be taken into consideration when a decision is being made.

Bryant: What advice would you share with a first-time CPO?

Jalihal: The first thing is that there is no playbook, and that's a good problem because you can define the playbook. It's an opportunity. I built my career that way, as I've tended to take on roles that didn't exist in organizations before.

The second piece of advice is to make sure they understand how value is generated in their organization. If you don't understand how value is created, you cannot connect people and culture to it. I have no patience for HR professionals who want to do things because it's the next coolest thing in HR. If it doesn't work for the business, it should not be done, even if there are 15 other organizations that are saying this is really cool and you should do it.

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some more.*

The third thing is listen, listen, and then listen some more. Really pay attention to what people are telling you. For the first three to six months, it's okay if you don't have an opinion. Just listen.

Lastly, you don't need to be a cuddly bear to be an effective chief people officer. You don't have to be a cuddly bear to care about people. Being direct, holding people accountable, being tough, holding them to a high standard, is important because you're setting the tone for culture in your organization. You're setting the tone for development and people management. Being direct is also being kind, so embrace that.

Reimer: How do you think about building leaders these days?

Jalihal: It's about making clear that your role goes beyond just delivering on your job. Leadership is not just about the size of your team. You can have a two-person team and still be a leader because you're having impact, and you are a custodian of culture, of engagement and development in an organization.

We are no longer in a place where leadership is all about just getting the work done. It's become so much more than that. There's so much ambiguity. I cannot write a rulebook for leadership development anymore. I can't write a 100-page policy document about whether you should let an individual on your team work in a flexible model or not.

You're the manager. You know the person. You know what works for them. You know their challenges. Here's a framework; make the call. That's a tough and very uncomfortable position for many people to be in. I think HR has a role to play in teaching people how to make difficult decisions.

Bryant: What were other important early influences for you? What were you like as a kid?

Jalihal: If you had met me in first grade, you wouldn't have recognized me. I wasn't this confident. I didn't feel that everything was an opportunity. I was a very meek child, and not very confident for a variety of reasons. But I faced some adversity early on in life that has shaped my appreciation for what adversity really can be or what it can lead to.

I give a lot of credit to my parents who helped me find my voice as I grew older and let me be who I wanted to be. There wasn't a formula I was expected to follow, and I had the opportunity to see the world and decide for myself what I wanted to do.

The third thing is that I really feel that when adversity comes your way, there is an opportunity. I've learned that over time from my parents and from many leaders I've worked with — I saw them taking what would otherwise be viewed as a problem and reframing it in their mind as an opportunity.