



Strategic CHRO

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It's Always The Most Complex Challenges That Land On Your Desk

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Heidi Capozzi, global chief people officer at McDonald's, shared her key leadership lessons with my colleague, David Reimer, CEO of The ExCo Group, and me in our latest Strategic CHRO interview. Subscribe [here](#) for future interviews.

Reimer: What are the leadership muscles you've developed in the last two years that you want to carry forward?

Capozzi: The pandemic has been formative to all of us in some way. For me, going through the process of supporting employees who are quite literally going through some of the toughest times they've faced — losing family or friends, and dealing with other challenges in their lives — has been an important experience. It has strengthened my empathy gene in a lot of ways.

Another muscle I've strengthened through the pandemic, and want to carry forward, relates to intentional communications. When you're in the office, you have these opportunities to bump into people in the hallway and exchange information. You can sit down and be face-to-face with someone and build a relationship and trust.

Working remotely, I learned quickly how important it was to be present in the moment — to be really thoughtful about including everyone on my team. It was also about understanding that more time was going to be required in the meetings and outside of the meetings to build those relationships. We're always going to be in this hybrid mode, and we've got to continue to be careful about how we communicate going

forward.

Bryant: Leading in these times requires an ability to deal with disruption and uncertainty. Is there something in your background that makes you comfortable in this kind of environment?

Capozzi: The approach my parents took was to really focus on building that strong foundation— faith, values, commitment to your community. But they balanced that with a willingness to let me make a lot of my own choices and explore my own interests.

In high school, I was very interested in studying languages. My parents let me travel at the age of 14 to spend the summer with friends of the family in Germany. So I had that interest in adventure and the courage to feel that I could draw on my different capabilities to see myself through that.

Reimer: One of the balancing acts of leadership right now is listening to employees but not turning organizations into democracies. Sometimes the answer is simply "no." How do you think about that?

Capozzi: It's a challenge, and like many others, we continue to find our way through that. I am a staunch supporter of the voice of the employee. That means getting out of your chair to meet with them. Get out to the restaurants, work alongside the teams, visit other markets and sit with crew and managers to hear their stories and take that insight and act on it.

It gets back to open lines of communication and transparency. There are always going to be people who might disagree with decisions we make. You have to explain why we came to the conclusion that we should be doing something a certain way — how it matches our values and who we are as an organization — to understand why we think a certain choice is good for the organization.

Bryant: What are some key lessons you've learned in this role?

Capozzi: One of the best pieces of advice someone gave me when I became a CHRO for the first time was to reach out and build my network of CHRO peers. You very quickly learn that it's not the easy problems that come to you; it's the most complex challenges that land on your desk.

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There will be many times when you've never personally encountered an issue before, but rarely is there a new issue or problem in the world. Someone else has faced it. And I have found the CHRO community to be an incredibly helpful resource.

Reimer: When you hire, what are the key qualities you're looking for during the job interview?

Capozzi: It's a combination of values, skill set, and leadership. There has to be alignment around values. Someone who's going to be successful in this organization needs to hold and carry and live out the same values that we as an organization put on the top of our list. I'd absolutely be interested in your set of experiences as it pertains to the role, and I want to know that you have a real curiosity for continuing to learn.

I'm also looking for someone who has really strong leadership skills and wants to take the time to get to know their team, to invest in their team and, frankly, to be a great collaborator across my leadership team.

As I tell my team all the time, there's no issue that only one person is going to solve. All of these things are interconnected, and you have to be very good at reaching out and consulting with and working alongside your peers so that we can get the best answers for the enterprise.

Bryant: Other key moments of leadership lessons for you?

Capozzi: One is about learning to balance both speed and execution with bringing the organization along. In other organizations I've worked for, they tended to be contemplative, and we were often looking to have 100 percent or 110 percent of the right answer before we would move to implement a plan.

But I've learned to feel comfortable having 80 to 85 percent of the right answer and moving ahead, knowing that if it wasn't right the decision,

it will be a learning moment that we would then use to revise our approach. That has been an important factor for me in driving transformation for organizations.

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