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'You Have To Be Really Clear About The Kind Of Top Team You Want To Create'

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Monique Matheson, CHRO of Nike



Adam Bryant [in](#)

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Monique Matheson, CHRO at Nike, shared her key leadership lessons with me and my colleague, David Reimer, CEO of The ExCo Group, in our latest Strategic CHRO interview. Subscribe [here](#) for future interviews.

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

Matheson: So many people are focused on finding silver linings and what we can carry forward. Just the optimistic view of coming through challenges like this really resonates with people, so one is our ability to remain flexible and agile in this very dynamic environment.

I've always been a leader who has to have a plan, but the past couple of years has required a degree of flexibility around redoing the plan or coming up with a totally separate plan. It has been an exercise in flexibility like nothing I've ever experienced. That can create some real benefits in the way we work — around being open to different and new ideas.

The second thing is the idea that we've been more transparent with the fact that we don't have all the answers. We have said in our all-employee meetings, in our VP meetings, and to my team, we've just never done this before. So we are making the best calls we can based on the information at hand.

We're rooted and grounded in our core values, but we're just not going to get everything right. That can create nervousness for senior leaders

because when employees ask us those tough questions, we often feel like we have to have the answers. And so we've really been modeling this idea of you don't have to have the answers.

Bryant: What is it about your background that makes you comfortable in this time of relentless disruption?

Matheson: My training is as an employment lawyer. So I've always been really interested in that intersection of social justice, equity, and people. You get to think about how people can be amazing when they're together facing these huge challenges. Those have just always been very interesting to me.

And you pair that personal interest with a background in sports. I've been an athlete since I was really small. Athletics were core to who I was. I had amazing coaches. They helped me understand teamwork, collaboration, spirit of competition, dedication, and they fed my self-esteem. It's been a really strong influence in my life. And then I throw in some pretty healthy doses of a middle-class upbringing and humility from parents who were both public educators.

Reimer: What is your framework for this moment when employees increasingly feel like they should have a voice and a vote in companies' policies?

Matheson: Employee expectations are higher, and I think it's pretty healthy. Part of what's going to work really well going forward is listening harder and making sure you have mechanisms and ways to

understand what your employees are thinking – what’s going well, where they need help, how they define value.

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The closer you are to understanding that will help you make really smart decisions and choices on behalf of the company. We’re not asking them because they’re going to tell us what we’re going to do, but you do have to be asking them so that you have their insights when you are making those decisions.

I feel very strongly you can’t give your job away in asking for voice and input. Our employees need to see themselves reflected in the strategies and programs, but it’s our job to make sure that we’re making the right tradeoffs on behalf of our business and our people and our culture.

Bryant: What are the key lessons you’ve learned in this role?

Matheson: The CHRO network is really helpful because it gives you a sense that you’re not alone. There’s rarely an issue that any one of us is dealing with that the others aren’t dealing with, as well. There aren’t many people who really understand what it’s like to be in this seat.

It’s also important to spend time early on with the executive team to

understand their goals, challenges and aspirations. We've created a very strong agenda that is ours. It's not mine. It's an HR people agenda that is owned by our CEO and our executive team, and I run point. The earlier you can establish those "we" moments, the easier it is to run your agenda, the easier it is to make connections across the organization so that you're creating value that people see and want to be a part of.

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Third is that in your HR organization, you have to be really clear about the kind of top team you want to create. Just like any other part of the organization, it sets the tone, and you can't tolerate behaviors that aren't consistent with the culture you're trying to drive for the broader organization. Over time, I've made adjustments in my leadership team. You just have to be intentional about the kind of team you're building.

Bryant: And when you're hiring, how do you interview candidates?

Matheson: I ask a lot about how you think about things. I ask a lot about how you achieved something you're either proud of or that was a big miss, and what you learned. It's not about the particular answer. I want to understand how you think, how you learn when things don't go well, and how you work with and through others.

But some people have trouble sharing something that didn't go well. And if you don't know that, then there's probably something else happening that's going to be a blind spot. We all have them, and you're better off knowing them. So if you don't know them or you're not willing to share them, then there's probably a limit to how effective you can be in a big leadership job.

Reimer: What were some other important influences for you early on?

Matheson: I grew up in a really small town in eastern Washington, and my dad was a superintendent of schools. My mom was also in public education, so I was a big fish in a small pond. Sports were a big part of my life, and I mostly just wanted to play tennis my whole life.

People used to get on my parents about how hard they were pushing me, but they would say, "We can't make her do anything. There is no pushing going on. This is just her thing." And I had an amazing and dedicated coach who would pick me up at 5:30 in the morning before school. We would drive to the indoor tennis courts and have a lesson for over an hour. He would drive me home and I would get ready for school. We did that almost every day in middle school.

We moved to Seattle during my freshman year of high school, and I became a little fish in a big pond. So that was a big switch. But sports, again, were my main way in, and I could distinguish myself as a strong athlete. I got a scholarship to play tennis for the University of Washington, and that's where I really got more of my academics turned

on as a student-athlete. That drive is just who I am. I don't have another gear. I tried to fight it earlier in my career, but I just had to acknowledge that this is my gear. It's what I do.

I'm also very optimistic. I just want to create better environments. I want to help people thrive. My parents were all about equal access to education as the ultimate equalizer, so my sport was a way into education. And that comes with some healthy doses of humility.

Anyone who's a high-level athlete knows that there is always someone who is better than you, so you have to just appreciate the fact that you're competing.

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