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# The Workforce Is Demanding A Very Different Relationship With Employers

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***Andre Joyner, chief human resources officer at JCPenney, shared his 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: The retail industry has faced a fair amount of disruption, even before the pandemic started. Are there a few big takeaways from this period that influence how you think about problem-solving?**

Joyner: The landscape does change quickly, in the retail space and in HR. You have to be able to navigate the environment you're in at the moment you're in it. If you look back over the last three to five years, no one would've predicted what has happened.

So the question is, how quickly can you assess, diagnose, and understand the challenge in front of you and then quickly move to solve and address it, all with the understanding that you might have to rewrite that story quickly and on the fly? Everything is on much shorter cycles now. If you can understand that and you're less fixed in your thinking, you will find yourself able to move much more quickly to the right solution in that moment.

**Bryant: What is it about your background that prepared you to not only survive in this environment of constant disruption and ambiguity but even thrive in it?**

Joyner: My mother was the oldest of 11. When you're the oldest of 11, you're effectively a parent. You don't really get to be a child. And in her upbringing, she wasn't one for excuses. So when she became a parent herself, accountability was a big thing.

At the end of the day, a well-articulated reason for why something didn't happen wasn't an acceptable answer to her. So my life experience has largely been about figuring things out, and that helped me think about my world in simple ways — I'm a problem-solver, and ultimately that's the value you add. You help businesses solve difficult problems. I do it through talent and culture and organizational effectiveness. Those are my levers. You have to have a deep understanding of the problem you're facing and solve it.

**Reimer: What issues are top of mind for you these days as an HR leader?**

Joyner: I'm going to use a popular term but in a different way — the future of work. What I don't mean by that is the discussion around back-to-office and hybrid work policies. What I do mean by that is a complete reimagining of the relationship between the associate and the employee.

The pandemic accelerated something that I believe was already happening, which is that the workforce is now demanding a very different relationship with their employer, and they have shown the ability to influence that relationship at the individual level. It's not just about just the power dynamic because of supply and demand. There's a

change in the psychology of work, and I don't know if organizations are recognizing it.

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psychology of work.*

We tend to think in terms of competing on pay and benefits. And all those areas matter, but what we're missing is the sense that over the last couple of years the worker has decided something very different about what matters and the relationship they expect to have with an employer. That authentic relationship, with expectations that go both ways, is the difference maker in organizations that are going to succeed or not in attracting the talent they need.

**Bryant: But is it possible to move beyond that historic push-pull tension?**

Joyner: Organizations that are more native to this new environment are having a big impact. For example, if I work for a ride-share company and I can work when I want and get paid the same day, that's a new arrangement compared to the traditional one in which you agree to work certain days and you get paid once or twice a month. It creates a lot more flexibility for people to work on their own terms and their own schedule. And if you're a tech worker, you now have a lot more flexibility in terms of where you can work. That creates a very different dynamic.

People have reimagined what's important to them and they have different demands and expectations for the role that jobs play in their lives. You have to create an authentic relationship with people that they can value deeply. Organizations have to differentiate themselves through deeper connections in the areas that people value most. In our associate value proposition, we focus on shared purpose, development, well-being and empowerment. Those areas are about deepening that relationship so that it moves well beyond a transactional one.

**Reimer: How are you thinking about the future of leadership?**

Joyner: The core ingredients of leadership are still there. Creating a clear vision and aligning people around that vision will always be important. But leaders today need to show that they deeply care about, and are listening to, their employees. The best leaders can bring people into a discussion so that they feel a part of it. People want to feel heard, they want to feel connected, and they want to feel listened to.

**Bryant: What have you seen be effective in terms of initiatives to promote diversity?**

Joyner: The big question is one of substance. What are the things that organizations are willing to do to drive sustainable transformation and change in this space? With many organizations, especially in my industry, you often see the metaphorical pyramid, with significant diversity at lower levels and much less diversity at higher levels. The disparity can be pretty glaring.

The challenge that organizations run into, and where they struggle, is when you try to solve this problem at the point when you have to solve a problem. Hypothetically, if I want to fill an important role, I don't want to wait to fill it, and I may not want to cast a wider net because that takes a long period of time, and I surely don't want to pass on someone I think would be really great at the job. That is not the moment that you are going to open yourself up to identifying diverse candidate slates and picking from them. It's not what organizations typically do because the hiring manager is trying to solve an immediate problem.

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The right way to do it is to be committed and invested in this for the long haul. That means developing deep relationships, connections and pipelining. You have to be willing to find great talent and bring that talent into the organization — not at the absolute moment of convenience, but when you find the right talent.

When I was an intern at Kraft Foods, they did a really good job of hiring diverse chemical engineers. And I remember thinking to myself, how did they do that? Turns out they started doing this years earlier by essentially adopting HBCUs that had strong engineering programs. They would take the very best talent out of those schools, and those schools, because of the deep relationship with Kraft, encouraged the

very talent to go there. Kraft didn't have to do much heavy lifting because the schools did the lifting for them. The lesson is that you've got to make thoughtful investments ahead of time.

**Reimer: What lessons would you pass along to first-time CHROs?**

Joyner: I'd say to them that you may feel like you need to change who you are when the reality is that you probably just need to expand who you are. If you're a strong problem-solver and that's what propelled you into this role, the problems are a little bit different — maybe they're bigger and more complex — but you're still going to go through similar steps to solve the problem. So expand yourself.

I'd also say that the honeymoon period idea is largely dead. Whatever honeymoon period you think you have, you really don't have, so don't fool yourself. Be clear on the value you add and be almost irrationally focused on delivering that value. If you try to spread yourself too thin, you won't make progress. As a leader, you have to drive hard the key initiatives that you're trying to deliver to the organization.

**Bryant: In all the work you've done with senior executives in different roles, what patterns have you noticed about why they succeed or fail in their roles?**

Joyner: I've noticed three things that differentiate leaders, and it's across the spectrum. The first is curiosity. Whether you call it growth mindset or something else, leaders who are less baked in their thinking and are curious tend to excel.

The second is self-awareness. Can you see yourself as others see you? Can you take the balcony view and watch yourself and recognize how you perform in the moment? People who are self-aware can adjust. They are coachable and malleable.

The last thing is what I mentioned when I was talking about my mother. Are you accountable? That mindset will get you across the finish line. You've got to own it. And when I see those three things come together, I see people who can navigate challenges because they're constantly in diagnostic mode. They assess, they figure out the path, they recognize what they need to do and they deliver.

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