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You Have To Find Value And Inspiration In Helping People Be At Their Best

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April Arnzen, chief people officer of Micron Technology



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***April Arnzen**, chief people officer at Micron Technology, 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 big questions you're wrestling with right now?

Arnzen: What is top of mind for me — and I know it's top of mind for many of my peers — is, what does the next decade or two look like in terms of leadership, in terms of culture, in terms of really engaging the workforce of tomorrow? Because it is so different than what it was even pre-pandemic. We all need to rethink our programs, our practices, without losing the best of what companies had in the past.

How do you take that forward? Reimagining the work experience is pretty important. During the pandemic, most companies had to swing the pendulum really far. Now's the time to find the right balance of the past and the future and take companies forward.

Bryant: To that point, how do you create a sense of culture when so many people are working at home?

Arnzen: What I'm seeing so far is really defining the important moments and creating connections in those moments. With my team, I have more people working remotely than ever before, and the day-to-day work for the most part can get done from anywhere. But it's those

moments when you bring everyone together to a single location to build and form relationships, to define strategy, to do a check-in on progress and execution, where I see magic happen. We used to take those moments for granted when you just came to work every day. We don't take those moments for granted anymore.

Reimer: What does that mean for the role of the manager and the role of the employee?

Arnzen: It's going to force leaders to be even more clear than they were in the past — clear about the vision, the strategy, the goals and measures and expectations that they have of employees. And employees need to feel some ownership to raise their hand virtually to reach out. Employees have to take some ownership and feel empowered to speak up more, which is a good thing.

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Certainly, a focus for us is making sure all of our employees feel like they're bringing their voices to the table. So it's going to be capability-building on both sides for leaders and employees. They are going to have to work differently. It is going to require leaders to lead more and be clear. But employees have to have that intrinsic motivation to make an impact and speak up when they don't understand how they can make that impact, or if they don't have the skills or the resources to make that impact.

Bryant: What is it about your background that makes you able to handle all the ambiguity and disruption in your role these days?

Arnzen: A big part of it is the industry that I've been in my entire career. The semiconductor industry and the memory industry have been incredibly volatile for a couple of decades. We had a CEO who embraced this incredible volatility. He was a tremendous competitor and he knew during the low times that we were going to become stronger. We were very fiscally conservative because we knew we had to get through these tough times. If you look at Micron's history, that is when we did our best acquisitions.

So I gravitate toward these impossible and tough challenges that other people might look at and say, no thanks, I'm going the other direction. So as difficult as this pandemic has been, this is what I love. There were no answers. You had to create answers. There were no playbooks. It was absolutely imperfect data and you've got to script a company strategy.

Reimer: What are some other key leadership lessons for you?

Arnzen: One thing that has been true for my entire career is my focus on my own growth. A few years ago, I had the opportunity to go to Stanford for my executive MBA. It was one of those accelerated programs where you completely disconnect from work. I was already chief HR officer, and as I was packing my bags to leave, my kids were asking me, "Mom, why are you leaving to go to Stanford? You graduated many years ago. You're in the top job for your field. Why

would you go back to school?”

It was in that moment that I realized I needed to teach my kids what I had learned as a leader. It does not matter what role you're in, and it does not matter who you are, you can never stop learning and pushing yourself to grow.

Bryant: As Chief People Officer, there are a lot of different roles you play on your leadership team — you're a member of the team, but you're also an advisor who gives feedback.

Arnzen: Wearing all those hats can be difficult. When I first stepped into this role, it was really important that I was authentic and always stayed true to my values and the company values. So I think my peers can predict what I'm going to say because they know who I am and they know what values and culture I'm going to uphold.

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Sometimes I might need to hold up the mirror if they've got a blind spot, and every leader has them. My goal is for my peers to never be surprised by what I tell them. They should know what I am going to say because they've heard it from me before or because it's aligned to who we are as a company.

Reimer: What is the hardest part of leadership?

Arzen: The hardest part of leadership is that you're dealing with imperfect humans, and that you yourself are imperfect. It is sometimes messy and uncomfortable, but you have to find the value and the inspiration in helping other people be at their best, helping them have a successful career, make an impact, and take care of their family. That for me is the beauty and the messiness of leadership. What is your purpose as a leader? It's to bring out the best in other humans. It's not easy. But when you do it, it's worth it.

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