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"Being A Leader, At Any Level, Has Never Been More Complicated"

Published on October 20, 2022



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Jacqui Canney, chief people officer at ServiceNow, 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: How has your approach to developing leaders changed?

Canney: We are giving them more tools because being a leader, at any level, has never been more complicated than it is now. We are providing them with more training on the technical skills of being a leader, and we are also talking a lot about trust and psychological safety, and how you build it. Our senior leaders are also role-modeling the idea that you don't have to have all the answers, and that you should know where to go for help. Inclusion is the other big topic. When people ask me what's the most important skill or capability to succeed in the future, I often say inclusion.

Bryant: Inclusion is one of the big leadership words that we could spend hours unpacking. What is your framework?

Canney: The CHRO's role is to help create a thriving company, and that includes making sure your systems and processes provide everyone with the same best shot at the best jobs. You want people with the greatest potential to get the best opportunities.

As CHROs, sometimes we can get caught up in the process and tactics of our jobs. So you have to step back sometimes to examine whether

those processes and systems are in fact magnifying and augmenting the outcome that you're trying to drive around inclusion. When we think about who gets promotions and opportunities, we have to use a systemic and data-driven approach to making choices, rather than relying on the network effect that can drive decisions in a lot of companies and work against creating an environment of inclusion.

Reimer: What are some top-of-mind concerns for the HR profession overall these days?

Canney: Everybody is talking about hybrid work now. How do you create an environment in this new world of work where people can thrive, and that is equitable, sustainable, and good for the company? I don't think any company has totally figured that out yet. So rather than call it hybrid work, we need to frame the question more broadly — what are the solutions that are going to make this next 50 years of work more productive than the last 50 years?

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The HR function needs to continue to change, too. When I think about our traditional way of working, it was processes, systems, and tools, and we were structured around disciplines like rewards, talent development, and HR business partners. That model has been shattered

over the last two-and-a-half years, with the Great Resignation and all the other changes we are dealing with.

Employees are in the driver's seat, and HR leaders have to create experiences that provide people compelling reasons to stay, whether it's through learning, development, or the teams you're on, in addition to the rewards. We don't think as much as we should around a product mindset. That's a big change that's coming to the function, and it's going to upend the whole function.

Bryant: What are some of the patterns you've noticed among successful leaders?

Canney: When you come into a new company or a new role, people often automatically expect that you're going to change things — the team, the strategy, the priorities. After all, that is in part why you're here. But there's a balancing act in building a team, where you're honoring and respecting the previous culture and strategy while painting an optimistic view of a future that people want to be a part of and contribute to.

Getting the best out of people when you come into a new team is hard for some new leaders because they feel so much urgency to create change, and they are missing the boat if they're not bringing along the culture and the values. People have it in them to grow and change, and the leader should be the one to bring it out of them. It shouldn't be about automatically changing out a team.

If you can invest in people and bring them along and trust in them, you can get more out of people than sometimes they even see in themselves. You've got to be hungry and humble as a leader to understand that, and it's an important lesson that we all need to be reminded of sometimes.

Reimer: What were important early influences that shaped who you are as a leader today?

Canney: My mom and dad were a team, and they both worked from the time my sister and I were very young. We lived in the suburbs of New Jersey. It was not a lavish lifestyle, but we had everything we needed. Our parents enrolled us in a Catholic school because they valued the education that they thought that it would provide for us.

They taught my sister and me to believe that we could do anything but we had to work for it. They were working for it, and we could work for it, too. That meant getting jobs early on, getting good grades, and trying hard. I wanted to go to Boston College for undergrad, but my parents didn't have the \$18,000 a year for tuition. So we sat at the dining room table and they counted out the savings bonds they had saved from the time I was a baby. I was going to work to make up the difference. It was up to me to do my part.

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