



Strategic CHRO

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You Have To Figure Out How To Elevate Yourself Above Your Comfort Zone

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***Deirdre Drake**, chief people officer and head of corporate communications at U.S. Cellular, 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: One of the many challenges of leadership now is finding the right balance between making sure employees feel heard but also making decisions that may not be popular. How do you think about that?

Drake: We take a very simple approach to how we engage our associates to make sure they're seen and heard. We establish where we're going in terms of our strategy, and we tell everybody ad nauseam where we're going in everything from town halls to on-the-ground listening sessions. And we ask for people's feedback.

Hearing them is one thing, but the key is to then communicate about what you heard — these are the things we're going to lean into and work on; these are the things you told us are working well and we're going to double down on those; these are some things that we can't do right now because of other priorities or resource constraints. People really appreciate that approach.

Bryant: And how do you prepare your leaders for some of the conversations that veer into potentially controversial topics?

Drake: It's about understanding their role as leaders and ensuring that they're creating an environment that enables the dialogue. People may not agree with every position that employees have on an issue, but they know first and foremost that the company's position is one of support and inclusion. Through a program we call "courageous conversations," our leaders and others can come together and listen and share their experiences and perspectives on a number of topics, whether it's race or what's happening in the Ukraine.

We have two ears and one mouth for a reason. Those forums afford our leaders the opportunity to listen and help form a perspective that enables the discourse. People have a right to their opinions, but we also want people to be open to the discourse. That's our expectation of leaders.

Reimer: What influences from earlier in your life helped prepare you to lead in an environment with so much disruption and ambiguity?

Drake: My mother was a very big influence. I grew up in Flint, Michigan. My mother was a stay-at-home mother, and my father was an autoworker. He never aspired to leadership, and he worked on the assembly line for his 35-year career with General Motors. But my mother, within the spheres that she could control, including her missionary circle, was a natural leader.

I learned a lot of lessons from her about how you get people to do something they may not want to do, and how sometimes you have to do

some things you may not want to do, but need to do for the good of the cause. All of those lessons go as far back as sitting at my mother's feet during her missionary circle.

Bryant: How do you think about the role of HR in helping boards with succession planning?

Drake: It is critical at multiple layers. The CHRO can play a critical role in making sure the board understands that there's always a "what's next" in planning. I have seen situations in my career where people have rested on changes they just made, and assumed that they didn't have to think about it for the next two or three years. And then, because of some unforeseen event, they had to act and they were not ready.

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board.*

So it's the CHRO's responsibility to instill confidence with the board that we've been thoughtful about the evolution of the company and its mission through its people, in whatever form that takes. The CHRO also has to provide visibility for the board to the next cadre of leaders that are up for succession.

Reimer: In all the mentoring you've done over your career, what is the most common advice you share? What are the patterns you've seen?

Drake: Every senior leader has a mix of strengths, things that they are par for the course at, and things that are potential derailers. The executives who succeed are those who are open to listening to coaching about their potential derailers. People have a lot of mechanisms at senior levels to get feedback. But what you do with that feedback determines your relative success.

Bryant: What are the top two or three do's and don'ts that you would share with someone who is about to become a CHRO for the first time?

Drake: The answer depends in part on whether they are coming to the role with an HR background or if they're coming to the role from another functional area. If they were new to HR, I would tell them that you can't do this job through intuition. The human capital management function is an end-to-end life cycle, and you have to figure out ways to surround yourself with the functional expertise so that you can learn and absorb.

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to your quiver.*

For someone who has HR experience, I would tell them to figure out how to elevate yourself above your comfort zone. For example, I came up as an HR business partner. I told my team the other day I have a bias to the HR business partners because I know what they can do in terms of strategy and driving direction in an organization. But as the head of

HR, I can't rely solely on my skills as a business partner. You have to add more arrows to your quiver. The final point is to build an external network of people so you can get different perspectives on all the challenges we're facing.

Reimer: If you were advising somebody who was interviewing for a CHRO role on the best questions to ask the CEO – to make sure that crucial relationship is going to work – what would they be?

Drake: You want the CEO to be really clear about what they are trying to do and what they are trying to accomplish so you can understand whether you can help them. And something I always do is to ensure that the CEO gets to see the authentic Deirdre so they know whether or not they can work effectively with me. If you are selling something different than who you are and how you'll show up in the role, that rarely works well.

So how do you project through your questioning a sense of who you are and what your expectations are about that relationship? That will help you determine whether the CEO wants a close working relationship to tackle the big challenges or whether they see HR as more of a utility role. You want clarity about what that relationship is going to be, and about their willingness to accept messaging and change course based on that messaging.

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