

Strategic CHRO

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The Best Leaders Create A Rallying Cry Around What Really Matters

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Elcio Barcelos, CHRO at U.S. Bank, 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: What is a top-of-mind challenge that you are thinking through these days?

Barcelos: The big conundrum that we're trying to solve — and chances are most companies are trying to solve — is how to maximize the potential and capacity of our workforce. We are in a tight labor market, and the shortage of skills is a real factor. So we need to find a way to maximize the capacity of our 70,000 employees. How do we make sure that we're leveraging every ounce of capability that our workforce has

from a skills perspective? And how do we build the skills for those employees to then leverage those skills for the future?

That involves rethinking our entire learning ecosystem. How do we reskill our workforce with new micro- and macro-skills? And that starts with understanding our employee base. What skills do they have now? How do you leverage the full capacity of their current skills? When you do that, employees feel valued because they know their skills are being used.

Bryant: How are you thinking about building a sense of culture when not everybody is in the office every day?

Barcelos: Today, employees crave transparency and authenticity. They want to know that their leaders care, and they want to know when their leaders don't care about something, as well. The question then is whether the broader workforce wants to see the sausage being made, in terms of how we are thinking through various issues.

A good example of that is the debate about returning to the office. The foundational question for us is, who are we? Are we a company that allows you to work from anywhere, but you also should be in the office sometimes? Or are we an in-office culture that allows you to sometimes work from wherever you need to work? It seems like a simple question, but it's not.

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After some debate on the managing committee, we landed on the decision that we are an in-office culture that allows for flexibility. We didn't want to go down the road of mandating our employees to come back to the office, because that's not who we are, and that's not what our employees expect or want. But our employees deserve to know what we expect and what we want.

It's a key question that companies need to answer. Maybe you're a remote company and sometimes you're in an office environment. But if you're like us, we're an in-office culture. That's who we are, so let's be upfront and transparent about that. I think employees appreciate the authenticity that comes with that.

Reimer: What are some other challenges you're working through?

Barcelos: Employees have this desire for hyper-customization of their work experience. They want to do what they want to do, when they want to do it, and however they want to do it. After all, everything else in life is hyper-customized. Why wouldn't their work experience be the same way? So employers have to figure that out and we're not there yet.

How do we make sure that every employee knows that their voice matters? They don't always have a vote, but their voice really matters. That is a unique dynamic because in many other contexts of life, if people have a voice then they also have a vote. That's not necessarily the case in the corporate world.

Every one of our 70,000 employees needs to know that their voice matters, and they can share that through surveys, through town halls, direct feedback, and other meetings. But at the end of the day, we're going to have to make the informed call and we move forward from there.

Bryant: What are your insights on how to make the most of data?

Barcelos: We're doubling down on our human capital data and analytics capability within the company. We built a more capable ecosystem to analyze what our data is telling us. But here's one thing that we often forget — perception is data, too, and we often put that aside. But we have to manage perception like any other data set, because employee data is ultimately about what they do, feel and say. And perception is reality most of the time in how someone feels. Those are the three things that really matter.

Reimer: The role of the CHRO has become so much more challenging since the start of the pandemic. Do you have a role model you keep in mind for navigating all this uncertainty?

Barcelos: To your first point, there's never been a better time to be in HR. Our function has gone through so many changes over the last few years. The pandemic was really a proof point. What is the role of HR? What are we here for? How do we play the role of being the voice of the workforce, and at the same time be the voice of the business to the workforce? How do we manage through that conundrum?

That ability to find common ground is especially valuable in today's world.

A big influence for me was an uncle of mine. From an early age, I would go to him with any problem – even when it felt like the world was falling apart around me – and he would be incredibly calm. He would simply start by saying, “Let’s talk about it,” and he would just work through the issue, whatever it was. He became a huge role model for me.

As I’ve worked with leaders, I always appreciate those who can create calm in a storm. And it’s not just about bringing the intensity down because that’s not enough. You have to create a rallying cry around what really matters. That ability to find common ground is especially valuable in today’s world when there’s such division in society. To me, creating a sense of calm in a storm starts with, “What is it that we all believe in? What is the one thing that matters, and how do we drive that forward?”

Bryant: How else do you think about effective leadership today?

Barcelos: It’s the ability to create the right level of followership while inspiring actions through the team that are meaningful and purposeful. It’s the ability to understand the people on your team and how you drive outcomes through and with them. We also touch a lot on the concept of leading through influence.

How are you driving results through leadership even when the people you are working with may not report to you? I think the art of people leadership is a lost art and has been for a while, and the pandemic just accentuated that to the nth degree and reminded us about the importance of authenticity and building and fostering followership.

Reimer: Can you talk more about what you just said about the lost art of leadership?

Barcelos: I’ll share a story. I was working at HP in 2014, and Tracy Keogh, our CHRO at the time, asked her leadership team to develop a white paper on the future of work. She challenged her leadership team to think about defining the future of work and the leadership that would be necessary in 2020. I was responsible for developing the section focused on future of people leadership.

To get some perspectives from the younger generation, we went to Palo Alto High and asked a bunch of seniors to join us at the HP campus for an “Oprah-style” conversation. During the interview session, I asked them how they thought about leadership, and as part of that conversation, I said to them, “Let’s assume we just created a brand new

product and we decided to launch a new company. We've decided to hire all of you. How would you go about organizing who does what? Which role do you play and what's the future?"

One student said, "I'm really good with design and creative work. I could be the head of marketing." Another said, "I'm going to study finance, so I could be the CFO." Another student said, "I love details. I'm a project manager." Another person said they loved to travel, so they would be in charge of sales.

After everyone spoke, it dawned on me that nobody said, "I want to be the leader or the manager of the team." I pointed that out to the group, and somebody immediately said, "Who needs a manager? We'll all figure out how to do our different jobs and get everything done." And those students are now in the workforce. In fact, most would have graduated in 2020, and have been in the workforce for a couple of years.

I share this story because it shows there are changing expectations. People don't like to be managed, but they want to have a leader they can be inspired by and follow. So we have to rethink leadership to its core. That's why we're in the process of designing and implementing a new leadership development framework for the company right now.

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