



## Leading Through Disruption

Powerful conversations with prominent leaders on navigating this era of relentless change



Kristina Hammer, president of the Salzburg Festival

# You Have To Understand The Existing Culture First Before Making Changes



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*Kristina Hammer, president of the [Salzburg Festival](#), shared her key leadership lessons with me and my colleague [Adam Bryant](#), managing director of [The ExCo Group](#), in our latest "Leading Through Disruption" interview. [Subscribe here](#) to receive future interviews.*

**Lauterbach:** Stakeholder management is a core skill that all leaders need, and one that is essential for your role. How do you think about that?

**Hammer:** We do have many different stakeholders, and it's essential for us to keep a constant and open line of communication with them, especially in these volatile times.

And for me, stepping into this new environment with a 100-year history, the key is to show respect, to listen and to gain understanding of different perspectives. It is also about identifying points of tension, talking about those pain points and solving them.

**Bryant: This role represented a big career shift for you, after years of working in corporate roles.**

Hammer: Having run my own consulting company for more than 10 years and before that working in international corporations didn't prepare me exactly for this kind of role. But having worked in so many countries and cultures, I have a better understanding of what to look for, where to look, and what the sensitivities might be.

**Lauterbach: Can you learn to be culturally sensitive?**

Hammer: You learn it very much through experience, and you can also learn it by listening to people who have that experience. In the end, it is about kindness, humility, respect, and about genuinely liking people. And I am very curious. I'm curious to understand how the people I interact with developed their specific perspectives. As a leader, you have to adapt to the people you work with. You must understand the existing culture first in order to make possible changes.

**Bryant: How do you hire?**

Hammer: What I try to find out in an interview is whether this is a person we can help ignite, who will be passionate, and who will be willing to bring out the best in themselves and others — by listening and learning and by having this ability to stay calm in a fast-paced environment around the festival time.

I also learned an important lesson early in my life that informed my thinking about the qualities to look for in people. My parents sent me to the United States on my own for summer camp when I was 13 years old. I was the only non-American in the camp in rural Pennsylvania, and I had some difficult experiences at the beginning.

I went to the camp director to ask what I was doing wrong, and he told me, "You did nothing wrong. They simply didn't understand you. Talk to them and explain your background

and your culture." I then addressed that openly with the ones who were involved, and in the end, they voted me as one of the favorite campers, which was a huge honor.

The lesson was, that you can make a difference to situations you find yourself in. You need to speak up and turn situations around. It's about being able to handle situations that do not work out as planned, because this is what we deal with every day. That's the ability I'm looking for in people. Are they interested to listen and learn and to ask if they don't understand the task? Are they willing to strive and to grow?

**Lauterbach: Do you have any advice for leaders on how to get the best work out of highly talented individuals?**

Hammer: Highly talented people need respect and the right environment and the setup they deserve. You can really frustrate highly talented people by disregarding any of those three things.

Talented people are where they are, not only because of their talent but because mostly they work harder than anyone else. Not understanding this makes highly talented, hard-working people crazy. They need an environment where they are able to advance and to grow. And they expect you to deliver that environment for them.

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