



## X-Factor Leadership

Powerful conversations with heads of talent and learning at leading corporations



Fred Delmhorst

# The Best Leaders Bring Energy To The Team And The Organization



David Reimer

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*Fred Delmhorst, chief talent officer at Chubb, shared smart insights with me and my colleague [Adam Bryant](#), managing director at [The ExCo Group](#).*

**Reimer: What are some top-of-mind challenges that you're seeing for companies more broadly right now?**

Delmhorst: The Great Resignation has started to stabilize, and people are rethinking the social contract between employees and organizations. The pandemic accelerated changes that were already underway, but I believe that we have to be mindful of renewing the contract regularly.

Companies, and leaders, and structures and processes that are still focused on more long-term incentives might miss

the boat. So the broader question is, how do you redefine the employee value proposition for the next generation of talent?

**Bryant: Are there particular areas that you think require some scrutiny?**

Delmhorst: Compensation is the first one. For people who are right out of college and thinking about maybe where they'll be for the next six to twelve months, does a restricted stock award that vests in a few years have meaning? Performance management and career paths need to feel more attractive in the short-term.

**Reimer: If you think of the expectations that employees have, which would you put in the column of reasonable, and which are unreasonable?**

Delmhorst: In the reasonable column, I would put wanting a sense of purpose in your work, a sense of community with people you respect and simply enjoy being around, and the opportunity to forge a flexible career path that isn't rigidly defined or linear.

The less reasonable asks demonstrate a low degree of flexibility. Many organizations have taken a step toward more flexibility about remote working. If a company's going to be more flexible then it goes both ways. If we're going to redefine the boundaries between professional and personal life, there should be flexibility on behalf of employers and employees.

**Bryant: What are the X-factors that set apart the best leaders these days?**

Delmhorst: The most important thing is bringing energy to the team and to the organization. You always notice when the best leaders walk into the room or onto the floor. You can almost feel their presence before they get there because they bring so much energy. That's contagious, and instills the same drive and effort and motivation in everyone who's around them.

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Another important skill is being present, especially in this age of micro-distractions that are always tugging at us. I remember one of my first HR executives who put everything aside when you met with her. She wasn't distracted by the phone, and she wasn't distracted by email. You had her total attention, and we showed up for her because she showed up for us.

The last thing is being authentic. In any organization, there are so many roles that require different types of leadership styles. You have to be yourself.

**Reimer: What questions do you typically ask in job interviews?**

Delmhorst: I always start with asking people, "What is interesting about this role and this company for you at this point in your career?" It's about trying to understand how our company and what it can offer fits into their career and their narrative for their life. People who have done that homework answer that question more seamlessly.

I also like to ask, "What's your superpower?" It's a chance for people to show off a little bit about what they think makes them different. I also leave a lot of time for people to ask me questions. That's another way to gauge the extent to which somebody has done their homework to determine whether it might be a good fit.

**Bryant: And what's your superpower?**

Delmhorst: I'm a good listener and observer. I'm inquisitive and curious, and that helps me to better understand people.

**Reimer: In all the coaching and mentoring you do, what themes comes up most often?**

Delmhorst: The challenge I find most leaders and emerging leaders confront is how to be intentional about linking their work to their development as leaders. It's such a stark difference between those who are intentional and those who are passive. Some people move along in their careers, but they don't seem to have a clear direction. It's incumbent upon HR and talent leaders to help people achieve that clarity.

For example, a big question for mid-level managers is, are you on a subject-matter expert path or are you on a general-manager path? If I can help steer them to achieve clarity about which path they want to be on, they can become so much more intentional about their next steps.

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

Delmhorst: My mother was a research librarian, and she worked in a library that was open until 9:00 pm each night, so she had to do a night shift at least once a week. I would go there after school and just wander the shelves. Her work as a research librarian influenced my approach to being very evidence-based in my work. You bring more credibility to your role in HR when you can back up your points of view with evidence and data and research.

My father spent his whole career in commercial real estate. He is a very practical guy, and I remember when I was talking with him about college majors and that I was leaning toward psychology.

That probably sounded a little soft, so he said something to the effect of, "Well, it's great to be able to make widgets, but you need someone to buy those widgets." It was an indirect suggestion to follow your heart but just make sure that there's a practical component to it. So I've always navigated between those two influences from my parents.

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