Anabel Fall, Chief People Officer of the Zühlke Group

Leadership Means Knowing The Right Questions, Not The Answers

Dr. Anastassia Lauterbach
Managing Director EMEA The ExCo Leadership Group, NED, Professor for

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[Anabel Fall](), Chief People Officer at the Zühlke Group, shared key leadership lessons with me and my colleague, [David Reimer](), CEO of The ExCo Group, in our latest "Leading Through Disruption" interview.
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Reimer: How did you get into the CPO role in the first place?

Fall: I started at McKinsey as a consultant and then worked on their people strategy after five years of focusing on growth assignments. McKinsey's people development practices were moving from deficit- to strengths-focused, and I developed several leadership programs for partners.

Interestingly, this journey led me also to look broadly at sustainability and being responsible as an organization as the "Acting Director of Sustainability" when few companies talked about it.

After 10 years, I had a chance to create the people function for the Middle East region of McKinsey, looking into how to be globally consistent in performance assessment, appraisals, and talent management, while respecting local specifics and strategies.

After McKinsey, I moved to build the Talent Management function for a conglomerate in the Middle East before moving to Switzerland. Having worked for a number of years in a global organization focusing on people-related change programs, I had the chance to join the executive board as CPO of the Zühlke Group, a company of about 1,900 people, have a seat at the table, and shape the new thinking about people's impact beyond the traditional HR function.

In the end, you aren't necessarily a great leader just because you are smart. "I do not want the smartest tool in the box but the most interesting," is a quote from one of my mentors that stays with me.

Lauterbach: How do you structure interviews when hiring new talent?

Fall: You should not hire based on experience only. Potential and cultural fit are even more important, based on questions such as, "Do you want to work with this person, and do their values and purpose fit? Will they be successful in what we do going forward?"

Raising the bar in interviews is key for any organization. The challenge is that people, when left to make their own choices, will often hire someone who is very much in their own image. And at times, people will prefer to hire someone who is not as good as them because they don't want to feel threatened by someone who is better than them. This is a limiting and short-sighted approach.

Hiring should be about finding a person to contribute to the entire organization. At my previous companies, we conducted several blind reviews of interviewees before

having group discussions, to ensure independent and more diverse assessments.

We wanted experience and skills as well as mindset and cultural fit instead of confirmation of biases based on likes or dislikes of our colleagues, titles or degrees. This is challenging as not everyone is good at interviewing and reading between the lines or being able to emotionally assess people.

Reimer: What changes are occurring in organizations that are likely to stick, as opposed to two- or three-year accommodations that have been made in response to unusual circumstances like the pandemic?

Fall: Covid did not invent change but accelerated it, especially regarding flexibility and trust. The rate of change is so much faster. Despite several predictions, we don't really know what jobs we will do in five or ten years. As technology advances, things that take two weeks will be done in two minutes.

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Automation is on the rise. We need to rethink how people spend time in the workplace. The role of HR and leaders has shifted to not knowing the answers but knowing the questions and being more of a guide to help people in their respective personalized journeys.

Lauterbach: How do you think about accountability of leaders, given the growing voice of employees in European countries and their desire to influence corporate decision-making?

Fall: Today employees want greater control in how our organizations are run. It is an opportunity when people have a desire to be involved and are passionate to have a say. Leaders need to be able to listen to employees, balancing their needs and what's best for the entire business.

Importantly, we can provide tools and frameworks to support employees to take action for themselves—to share their ideas, come together as part of agile teams and

improve their organization, with leader input at key points. And the more diverse a team, the better the outcome.

What we see often, for example, is that younger generations of employees have great opinions and ideas but at times lack experience, while older and more experienced generations bring said experience but might need to be challenged not to be stuck in status quo or an expert mindset. We need to bring different generations of employees together. Young voices and ideas are essential to keep a business relevant, but experience is necessary, too.

We also need to rethink how we do people analytics. Systems can help us see how people can utilize their strengths and craft their journeys. But it isn't easy to do, as we need to comply with GDPR and further data protection obligations, and also because of a lack of shared language and alignment on skills.

Reimer: What shifts do you see in millennials' expectations of their employer? Which expectations are reasonable and which are less so?

Fall: For many employees of Gen Z, respect is a core value. Dignity and respect are not about naps, snacks, and outside childcare. They are non-negotiables; they are just employees' rights.

We've proven that people can work on their own. While complete freedom is not always appropriate — in certain circumstances, an entire team needs to come together – we certainly need more flexibility. Our focus should be on the best location for the work that needs to be done. Whatever the location, we need to protect people's wellbeing. For example, let's avoid emailing people at 2 a.m., as it can create anxiety if not put into context.

An additional challenge is that there is no alignment between regulatory systems to allow a person to work from different countries. Also, in discussing compensation, we need to look into the cost of living. It is unreasonable to ask for decoupling a discussion of payment from a location.

Lauterbach: The tapestry of the workforce is changing with freelancers and outside experts. Direct command and

control leadership no longer works. How do you enable leadership by influence?

Fall: Influencing is often more complex but also more rewarding than directing. It's the future. Leaders must invest time in building trust and creating a sense of confidence and belonging, and people will follow and go well above what you ask them to do. The challenge here is that many leaders have not seen what good looks like.

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They don't even trust themselves, and we want them to create an environment where people will go above and beyond. In the past, the best individual contributor became the people's leader. The challenge with this approach is that just because you are the best individual contributor does not mean that you are the best leader. People leadership, however, is something you need to want and feel. It needs to give you energy. You need to allow and enable your people to be better than you.

Reimer: What changed in leadership approaches since you started your career?

Fall: The first colossal shift is about listening and guiding instead of saying, "This is how we do it." It is about moving from knowing the answers to knowing the questions. The second change is bringing life and work much closer together instead of discussing work-life balance. It implies being more vulnerable—bringing more of yourself into the organization, and showing your weakness to encourage others to trust and achieve a better response.

Then it is about the changing nature of responsibility and accountability. Not knowing the answers and guiding people along what you've never done before in your life is scary—and you need to appraise people despite uncertainties.

What kind of baseline do you appraise them against today? Will it change 12 months from now? We can't appraise against what is in a role description or activities, and we need to assess impact instead. We need to ask what

success looks like and what skills a person needs to be successful. Ultimately, measuring an impact is harder than appraising activities and tasks.

An organization needs to know the North Star and then try to set a course for the next three months, then eight months, etc. Being agile about the course is complicated. In the last 50 years of management, we praised simplicity above everything else. You risk becoming simplistic. The word simplicity is entirely overused, as life is not simple. If you want simplicity, you first dive into the complexity to peel back the onion.

Lauterbach: How do you think about learning in an organization?

Fall: Learning happens when you force yourself to face controversies in a group of people with very different ideas. The HR community needs to enable mindset shifting. It is about encouraging people to become servant leaders helping others to forge their own learning and growth path. We cannot curate the training curriculum in the same way that we did ten years ago.

We should be capable of triggering something in a person to see that a career is not always about moving up because you can learn going down or sideways. If you limit yourself to one way, you limit your ability to scale, learn and contribute. Learning and growing is essential. If you do not move forward, you fall behind.

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