



## Leading Through Disruption

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



Sabine Bendiek, chief people and operating officer at SAP

# You Have To Keep Your Workforce Motivated To Grow And To Learn



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*Sabine Bendiek, chief people and operating officer at SAP, 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: What is the hardest part of leadership today compared to five years ago?**

Bendiek: The expectations of many employees have changed, the way companies operate has changed, and the speed of change has increased. If you put those three things together, the hardest aspect of leadership is, how do you step up as a leader to enable your people to bring their best selves to work in a highly virtual, geographically dispersed

environment? How do you align those individual interests and ambitions with what the corporation needs? How do you bring those together so that the team can excel, grow and thrive?

We've also seen a remarkable shift from a focus on hiring the best new talent to focusing on developing the people we have. With the Great Resignation, it has become even more important to focus on retaining and retraining people. There is a growing gap for skilled workers, especially when it comes to technology and digitally skilled workers.

You can't assume anymore that the traditional education routes will build the skills that companies need. So retaining, retraining, and reskilling is becoming the biggest imperative we have. It really comes down to making sure that you keep your workforce motivated to continue to grow and to learn. Then you need to make sure to align their individual ambitions to ensure you have the right talent to be successful as a company in the future.

**Bryant: How do these changes influence how you hire?**

Bendiek: There are the obvious focus areas around competencies. But it's also important to understand their personalities. Do they buy into our company values? Are they somebody who really values and enjoys continuous learning and collaboration? Do they demonstrate a willingness and interest and capability to build on the work of others, and to enable others to build on their work to bring diverse perspectives to drive better decision-making?

**Lauterbach: What is it about your background that prepared you for operating in this environment of endless disruption?**

Bendiek: The last couple of years drove home the reality that there are so many unknowns that you need to figure out, and that you have to figure out your own path for dealing with them. What are the values and core principles you're adhering to that you use as your guiding star?

This period has forced all of us to search inside ourselves and develop clarity about our core values as corporations and individual leaders. Covid was a kind of constant

character test for managers and companies because you always had to rely on your guiding principles for navigating all these brand-new challenges.

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I've also had a relatively diverse career, which helps because you become used to operating all the time in new environments. There is value in developing deep expertise in a subject area, of course, but I've really seen the value personally in having diverse experiences. I've always been focused on learning and I've always exposed myself to very new and different situations.

Having always been close to general management and sales roles in the past also helps in my current role as chief people and operations officer. That experience enables me to think through the guiding principles and find the resilience to try new things. And you have to continuously ask yourself about when you need to course correct versus staying on the course you have, even though it can feel unclear and unsettling.

**Bryant: What is the most common advice you share with executives when you pull them aside to give them some advice?**

Bendiek: Three things. First, listen. That can be tough for people who are in senior positions because they may feel that they have to prove that they know better. Listening requires a certain amount of vulnerability. But the higher up you go in an organization, the more important it is to be able to listen.

The second piece I always share with people is that you have to learn how to extend trust and then know when to start drilling down. But it starts with extending trust. That can feel terribly uncomfortable because you're on the hook for delivering what's expected of your team.

But extending trust is important because that's the only way you can actually unlock the capabilities and motivation of the people working for you. And the third piece is empathy, a

very important skill, but it doesn't mean you're not expecting high performance. The balancing act is to have high standards but also empathy.

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