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Francesca Luthi

# "You Need To Be Clear About What You're Trying To Accomplish"



**Adam Bryant** [in](#)

Senior Managing Director at The ExCo Group; Author, "The CEO Test"

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*Francesca Luthi, chief administrative officer at Assurant, shared her 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:** As chief administrative officer, you've got a lot on your plate. In addition to leading HR, you're also responsible for marketing and communications, investor relations, sustainability, global sourcing and real estate.

**Luthi:** I did not take the CHRO title because it is so much more and there is such a blurring of those lines. I definitely think that shift is permanent, in terms of the remit, expectations and needs. I see a lot more direct involvement

in business strategy and planning. As HR leaders, we have our hands in so many different pots.

What I bring to the table is that business lens. We're really thinking now about treating our employees like customers. So how do you use marketing principles to drive lifetime value and ensure that our programs really align with the diverse needs of our employee base? It's also about using disciplines of listening, feedback loops and continuous improvement with our customers. The role is like a P&L leader, and you're pulling on all these different skills and teams to execute.

**Bryant: What is it about your background that prepared you for this relentless uncertainty and ambiguity?**

Luthi: I was born in Switzerland in a very small town. Because of my father's work, we moved around quite a bit. So inevitably I had to adapt. When I moved to the United States, I didn't speak a word of English. It was really tough at the beginning, but I had to figure it out. My first friends here were also expats—a Japanese girl and a Spanish girl—and none of us spoke any English. We realized that we all loved Michael Jackson and Madonna, and through the language of music became the best of friends.

That idea is at the core sometimes of constant change. You try to figure out what brings everyone together, and that's always been something I've tried to embrace as a leadership style. We focus so much on the differences, but at the end of the day, there are things that motivate us that we can all align to.

I also have twin boys, and one has cerebral palsy. That's been probably the greatest lesson of my life in the sense that you never know what's going to happen or what shape things will take. Certainly, we had to adapt in our family and also recognize that those little milestones probably matter a lot more than what we assume.

Those little steps are so important to drive big change down the road.

So even in driving change across the organization, it's

helped me develop more patience over the years. You forget those little steps, but those little steps are so important to drive big change down the road. I've seen it with my son. He crawled later, and did many things later, but at the end of the day, he always got there. Stepping back, I'm able to see the massive progress, and sometimes that perspective is super-important, too.

**Reimer: One of the tougher aspects of leadership now is balancing empathy while also driving the right level of accountability. How do you think about that?**

Luthi: My father was a big influence. When he passed away, we received so many letters from his former employees. They talked about how he would want to know about their lives beyond work—"How are you doing? How is your son?" And he would help people land on their feet if, say, they had lost their job because of layoffs at their corporation.

So first and foremost, we as leaders have to be active listeners, because ultimately performance suffers if you're not listening, or you may infer something different than what the person you're talking to intended. It's so important in this environment—where you're not seeing someone in the flesh and have the benefit of being able to read their body language—just to ask people how they are doing.

Covid was like the great equalizer. It opened a door in terms of showing that we are all human. We just have to make sure that the door stays open by continuously engaging. That's what employees generationally are now expecting. That can be very powerful if channeled in the right way.

**Bryant: What are the X-factors that you are focused on to ensure leaders drive more change and impact these days?**

Luthi: Spending time on what drives the most value. That sounds very basic, but the hardest part of being a leader, a manager, an employee, is, how do I make sure that I'm being as efficient and effective as possible in delivering whatever it is I have to do. How do we have more of an impact?

We're all dealing with business uncertainty and that inevitably is pulling us in different directions. As a company,

we're ambitious. We're looking to sustain profitable growth. We need to innovate, and bring new offerings to market. And at the same time, we are obviously challenged to make sure that we have efficient cost structures and we're optimizing our labor across markets. There's a tension between the two. So how do we help the business solve for that and really take a long-term view?

The outcomes matter as much or sometimes more than the process.

I keep coming back to asking questions such as, what does success look like? If this were just one product you had to sell and you have a customer standing in front of you, how would you sell that product? The outcomes matter as much or sometimes more than the process. It's not solely about the twenty steps that you need to take to get there or to manufacture the product.

You need to be clear about what you're trying to accomplish. If it's not measured and it doesn't drive the right outcome, then that's not going to make you successful in the long run. You have to spend time where it's most valued, and so you have to be clear about how you define value.

**Reimer: When you mentor other executives, what is the most common advice you share with them?**

Luthi: Particularly with other women, I always say to them, "Be your best you." It's a lesson I've learned over the years. There's always an inherent desire to conform. Even in an environment where we are more attuned to diverse thinking and the benefits of inclusion, people can have a stubborn habit of sitting back sometimes and not sharing a perspective.

But nobody should compromise on sharing your thoughts and ideas. Ultimately your leader can decide to go in a different direction, but by sharing your perspectives, you've contributed to making a better decision down the road.

I also talk to people about the importance of patience, which is something I've had to learn along the way. I see that a lot with executives coming into an organization. They were

hired to drive change or add value, and they can have the perspective that they have to show immediate impact.

But doing that can limit your impact because you are operating without a grounded understanding of the culture and the business. You're going to want to make small changes along the way to help build a bigger vision.

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