



Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR



Sheila Rostiac

## "I'm The Chief Caretaker Of Our People, Places, And Reputation"



Adam Bryant [in](#)

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

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*Sheila Rostiac, chief human resources officer and chief diversity officer at PSEG, 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: You've got a lot on your plate. In addition to being the CHRO, you're also the chief diversity officer and you oversee corporate security, real estate, and corporate communications.

Rostiac: The path to getting here started in finance. I was a CPA and an accountant and I did that for PSEG for several years. Then I had the opportunity to do what was supposed to be a six-month rotation on the HR front, and the rest is

history. Communications is a natural fit with HR in terms of our messaging and branding, both for recruitment as well as making sure our employees understand our goals and strategies.

And real estate makes sense as part of HR's responsibility as we try to figure out our "work 3.0" model, because our office space and real estate strategy are a key part of supporting the future of work. So rather than working cross-functionally, I added those responsibilities. I like to say that I'm the chief caretaker of our people, places, and reputation.

**Bryant: What is it about your background makes you comfortable with new challenges and all the uncertainty?**

Rostiac: I'm one of five kids. My father was a union elevator mechanic, and he died of a heart attack when we were all quite young. I had just turned 13 years old. My mom was a stay-at-home mom and, in an instant, I had to grow up. The remaining six of us pulled together to do whatever we had to do to keep a roof over our head and literally to keep the lights on—and sometimes they went off because we couldn't pay the bill.

For me, that meant cleaning houses and doing some work for my dentist to pay off my dental bills. So I've never been too proud to do any job, and I have a disrespect for the impossible. I will do what it takes to get the job done.

**Reimer: How does that experience live with you today?**

Rostiac: That burning work ethic will always be with me. I usually show up about 20 minutes early to anything, because in my household, if you weren't downstairs first, you weren't getting a bowl of cereal. So some of those habits and rituals stayed with me.

But certainly I have an appreciation that life is short, and so you should keep things in perspective. In our world, just like in any company, stuff happens every day, and when stress is amped up, I have the perspective to say, "You know what? This isn't the worst thing that can happen." You call upon your team and you get the job done.

They should find strength in that rather than

| feeling there's a stigma.

I've also done a lot of personal development and soul searching to work through that early trauma. So my organization is very familiar with me being out in front, sharing resources, tools, talking about candor and all the messy stuff that happens in life. It's important for people to get help with that. They should find strength in that rather than feeling there's a stigma.

**Bryant: When you start working with a new team, what do you share with them about your preferences and work style?**

Rostiac: I do tell my story, because to know me is to understand me. I get up very early, and if people get an email from me at that time, I have zero expectations that they will respond right away. That said, if I haven't heard from you by noon, I do expect people to acknowledge that they got my email, and I will do the same for them.

I also tell a personal story about our core commitments at PSEG, one of which is safety, in terms of operations, ethics, integrity and protecting the brand. I was the first in my family to graduate from college, thanks in part to a scholarship, which was for studying accounting.

I went to work for Arthur Andersen, which at the time was one of the Big Six accounting firms. To this day, I have my sweatshirt from the Arthur Andersen softball team. As we all know, that company no longer exists, because they were the auditors for Enron. A couple of people were not doing the right thing and their colleagues who knew about it didn't speak up.

And so I always say to my employees that their actions have to be in line with our code of conduct, and that they are responsible for speaking up if they see someone acting in ways that conflict with our values. I know from personal experience what can happen when people don't do the right thing.

**Reimer: In all the coaching and mentoring you do, what is a common theme that comes up?**

Rostiac: One is that people sometimes don't understand the impact of what they say or how they act. They'll say to me, "I didn't intend for that. That's not what I meant." So there's a common theme of reminding senior leaders that their words and body language are often read literally, and people will start building their own narratives about what they thought the leader intended.

**Bryant: What is the development path for somebody who aspires to be in your chair?**

Rostiac: A big part of the role is being the culture and talent curator. You also have to have operational excellence, and understand the role and possibilities of data, analytics, and AI. From all that HR information, you have to be able to pull trends out of it to inform your strategies.

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The CHRO also serves as a business leader and strategist. For any conversation, you have to bring the employee perspective. I don't spend my day doing HR. It's translating the CHRO implications for where the business is going.

**Reimer: You've done a ton of hiring over your career. If you could only ask somebody one question in a job interview, what would it be?**

Rostiac: "What would you be doing if you weren't doing this?" And then I'll ask why. It's good to know what's important to people when they're not doing the task at hand. You find that they have superpowers. Maybe you have aligned interests, but people also often have skills that are completely unrelated to the job that you're hiring them for.

So you may have a data analyst on your team who is also really into photography, and you ask them to help out with an event and they'll say, "Thanks for thinking of me." It's good to understand all the other skills people have, and that makes them more engaged at work.

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