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Ian Wilson

## The Meaning Of "Great" HR Is Going To Be Very Different In The Future



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

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***Ian Wilson**, vice president of human resources at Amazon Web Services, shared his 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: Of all the issues that the HR field has been dealing with these past few years, what is a top-of-mind topic for you these days?**

Wilson: Employees' expectations for their employers are going to be fundamentally different than they were compared to past generations. That's partly because of what we lived through with the pandemic, but it's also because of some generational shifts. For me, the most

important question is: what is the nature of the people system that we all need to build to be compelling employers for the next five, ten, fifteen years?

That means giving ourselves the space and freedom to let go of anything that we thought we had right or had worked in the past. We need to embrace the fact that, going forward, great is going to look pretty different than it has in the past.

**Bryant: That relationship between employers and employees has long been framed in terms of who has more leverage in the economic cycles. It's almost like the housing market — is it a buyer's market or seller's market? Is it possible to change that dynamic?**

Wilson: I'll use your housing metaphor, but I see it shifting from a renter's market to an owner's market. Employees of the future have an expectation that it's their house — and we're seeing this trend even now. Some people use the phrase employee activism to describe what's happening, but I see it more as the next generation of employee engagement.

Employees want to be passionate about what they're doing, want to believe in the purpose of the organization, and want their work to have a greater impact than they could have as an individual, so they're going to lift that idea of ownership into the desire to shape the employer to be something that's going to work for them.

That's why understanding what is top of mind for employees is increasingly important because it's dynamic and it changes much quicker than it used to. That also means companies should communicate more directly and authentically with their employees to help them better understand their organization's expectations of them.

**Reimer: A common theme in many of our interviews with HR leaders is how much pressure managers are under these days to do more. A lot is being asked of them, and the role is changing.**

Wilson: We're having a lot of conversations about this right now. Specifically, we think a lot about the experience of our

builders. Builders is the term that we use to refer to all our employees across the organization because that is the core of what we're all about.

## How do managers create an experience for builders to thrive?

The old-school way of thinking about managers is to provide direction, institute policies and manage the outcomes of their employees. But for us, it's more about how do managers create an experience for builders to thrive? That's very different than someone who's walking around with a clipboard in a command-and-control sort of way.

And there are, of course, some elements of management that have always been important and will continue to be important. Can you relate to your employees individually on a human level? Do you have the right level of empathy as you think about the experiences that your teammates are having?

### **Bryant: What is it about your background that set you up to be able to operate in this kind of environment of ambiguity and endless new challenges?**

Wilson: I did have the opportunity for most of my life to play sports. I played football as a wide receiver at Cornell. You learn that no matter what the score is, you just keep playing. When you're winning, you keep playing. When you're losing, you keep playing. That helps build grit and resilience.

This "Day One" mindset that we talk about all the time at Amazon is also important. It means that every single day, all of us have permission to look at the data and anecdotes in front of us and make the best possible decision we can for our customers and our builders. It doesn't matter what we did yesterday or last week or last month. In a period of constant change and ambiguity, that Day One mindset has been a revelation for me.

### **Reimer: What's been a key leadership approach or lesson that you've learned?**

Wilson: I think that leaders play three key roles. They set direction, they align their stakeholders and they define the

values of the organization. When I took on this role about five years ago, the team was great and very scrappy as they worked to help build the business. But I got the sense that they didn't fully know why they were here, aside from the tactics and the work they were being asked to do. They didn't have a clear sense of purpose.

So we landed on a purpose statement, which is that AWS HR exists to accelerate the trajectory of this business. It's important that your purpose statement is durable and has an enough altitude to create room for your operators to figure out the right tactics. That statement became the anchor for many discussions that we were having with our business leaders, particularly around setting priorities.

**Bryant: What do you think is the biggest challenge of leadership right now?**

Wilson: The courage to say, "I don't know," or "We don't know." For some reason, there's a flawed perception that leaders should have all the answers. I don't think leaders ever really had all the answers.

Some have tried to fake it but, especially in times of uncertainty, it's important for leaders to acknowledge that they don't know the answer but they're committed to figuring it out and learning together over time. Amid all this macro-uncertainty, leaders are under a lot of pressure to come up with the answers that they don't have.

**Reimer: What are the most common themes that come up when you're mentoring senior executives?**

Wilson: One is authenticity. People don't want to work for roles. They want to work for people, and that's only true if leaders are authentically human in who they are and can be vulnerable.

I talk to many leaders about being the best version of themselves.

Particularly with executives who are rising up in their careers as leaders, I sometimes see them trying to take on some persona of what they think the person doing that role should look like, or act like, or do. I try to free people from any

expectation that they should be anything other than who they are. I talk to many leaders about being the best version of themselves rather than the second-best version of somebody else.

**Bryant: A lot of companies struggle with leveraging their matrixed structures, which can sometimes create a lot of additional layers that actually slow them down. Any advice?**

Wilson: We put a tremendous amount of energy into what we call single-threaded leadership, which means being as clear as we possibly can on who is going to be leading a particular idea. We try to give them as many resources as we can for them to be successful and we empower them to then go rally the broader system to accomplish their goals. Those horizontal relationships require energy on teams outside of your organization.

**Reimer: What other issues are just over the horizon for HR?**

Wilson: I think the people space is ripe for reinvention. The vast majority of the regulations, the laws, the common expectations inside the employment space, are artifacts of the Industrial Revolution. That's where employment as we know it now came from, and it hasn't been significantly disrupted to date. We'll continue to create new tools that will allow us to achieve and accomplish more. That's going to be true with artificial intelligence and machine learning.

The number one thing that we'll have to keep an eye on the next five to ten years in the people space is how people trust technology. This includes how trust and technology vary significantly across demographic groups in terms of age, race and ethnicity, country of natural origin, and even gender. We're going to have to be very astute in our understanding of these differences.

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