



Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR



David Scott

The Role Of HR Is To Help Companies Achieve Their Goals Faster



Adam Bryant [in](#)

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

May 3, 2023

David Scott, chief human resources officer at [Dish Network](#), 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: The historical dynamic between employers and employees has often been talked about in terms of who has the leverage at any particular moment. What is your take on how that dynamic is changing?

Scott: The days of offering free beer and offices that look more like the basement playroom for your kids are gone. Those aren't the perks that are attracting new talent

anymore. People are focusing a lot more on flexibility and benefits. And they want to feel connected to their company's culture and their manager.

We made the choice early on in the pandemic that we were going to go back into the office full-time. That helps a lot with connectivity among colleagues. So career development—and access to managers, leaders and their colleagues—have been a huge driver, especially for the younger workforce.

Bryant: We live in a polarized society today, and companies are expected to weigh in on broader issues more. How do you think about that?

Scott: There's an outsized role that corporations are playing now that goes beyond their traditional framework. So if you try to be a little bit of everything for everyone as a company, you'll be ineffective at being anything.

We've been a founder-led company for 42 years. We know very clearly who we are, and we try to maintain those ties to our core values and principles. And that allows me to be able to drive tough decisions based on our cultural values.

For example, we believe in working harder than our competitors, and winning is one of our core values. So on a Friday afternoon, we're going to get one or two more meetings in while our competitors may be on the golf course. We know our competitors are bigger than us, and we're competing in markets where it's tough to win. So that means we have to work that much harder to achieve our goals.

Reimer: A lot of the pressures of leading right now have fallen on the backs of managers, whose role has become exponentially more difficult in recent years. Your thoughts?

Scott: I think many corporations have overestimated managerial capability, and they've not done a great job in preparing them to deal with the stress that they've faced in the last few years. Part of the mental wellbeing discussions today are happening because of the strain on the managers and frontline HR team members.

If you try to be a little bit of everything for everyone as a company, you'll be ineffective at being anything.

I see companies going down two paths right now. One is to focus on manager competency and upskilling and providing resources and training. The second is that many companies are refocusing on the performance management cycle, which is removing accountability from a manager. We're seeing examples in big tech, where companies are laying off many employees who are performing below expectations.

My focus is on ensuring that my managers are empowered, and that they are establishing high standards and leading with accountability. They know who is most productive and effective on their teams in ways that our data and analytics teams aren't necessarily able to capture.

Bryant: What is your crystal ball about the role of technology in HR?

Scott: You have to start with people and really great processes to support them, and then technology should be used to support both people and processes. I took a Six Sigma class early in my career, and I believe in using technology to refine, automate and simplify repeatable tasks.

Five years ago, our definition of repeatable tasks was much narrower. Whereas in the past we may have focused on things like automating change-of-address for our employees, now we are looking to technology to help with interview screening and writing job descriptions.

We're implementing an AI chatbot in our HR shared services that in testing was able to handle more than half of the questions that came in. That means I can better optimize how people on my team are spending their time. I'm now trying to see how we can use AI to think about things like instructional design and content development.

Reimer: Historically, HR sometimes has been thought of as the department of "no," but increasingly it has shifted to becoming the department of "how"— how it can accelerate the business. Are you seeing that?

Scott: I have seen that evolution. It's not about responding to requests anymore. The focus now is much more about helping the company think through the best way to achieve its goals faster. The pandemic has helped, in a significant way, to position HR as a problem solver and as a thought leader and a crisis manager.

The best HR team members are deeply integrated in the business strategy. I'm responsible for anything that touches the employee experience, including real estate, travel and food services. Our jobs are a lot more complex than when I started in this industry 25 years ago.

Bryant: What are the patterns you've seen in terms of board effectiveness with HR issues?

Scott: The best board members I've interacted with focus on three areas. One is around talent management. How, for example, are you thinking about internal versus external talent for different roles? What are the skills that you are great at building or need to be buying in order to make the company successful? How often are people outside of specific talent silos included in succession slates, and how often are they selected for each role?

Another issue that is closely tied to that is, how effective are your succession tools today? How consistently are you placing the identified successor, and what is their success when placed into the role?

A third one is being clear about the behaviors that your compensation plan is meant to drive. I saw a stark example of this where a CEO was incentivized to simply build new stores, regardless of whether they were profitable. It wasn't thoughtful growth. Ultimately, the company had to close a significant portion of those stores because of that CEO's compensation plan.

Reimer: What were important early influences for you?

Scott: I tell my kids this all the time that it's great to play a sport because you learn a lot of lessons, including teamwork. But it's also great to be in a play because you'll use what you learned from speaking on a stage every day for the rest of your life. It's also important to learn how to

write a two-page essay rather than a 50-page essay, because an important skill in your career is your ability to get your point across in a concise and articulate way. I learned those skills early on.

I also spent a brief period in the Coast Guard, which taught me discipline and hierarchy and respect. And then, when I started my HR career, I never said no. At one point, I was asked to take on union avoidance, and growing up in Texas and Florida, I knew very little about unions. But that was a chance to learn a different skill. That concept of a T-shaped leader—of being deep in a discipline but also broad—is really important.

And if a boss of mine asked me if I wanted to travel for three days to visit our company's sites, I would say yes. I would listen to every conversation they had because I knew I could learn something. By doing trips like that, I learned to walk in the back door of a store instead of the front, because the manager at the front is going to tell you what you want to hear, but the guy unloading the truck will tell you what's really going on in that store.

Subscribe [here](#) to get all our Strategic CHRO interviews.