



Jeffrey Schmitz

Asking The Right Questions Is A Crucial Skill For Leaders Today



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Jeffrey Schmitz, chief people officer of Zebra Technologies, 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: What do you see as the big issues on the horizon for HR?

Schmitz: It's hard to predict the future because it seems like there's a new challenge every six months. But what will remain constant and interesting is, how does HR make sure that it is enhancing and driving the business?

Sometimes I've seen HR get involved in our own HR activities that seem all-important and that often are about driving efficiencies. But you have to make sure that you're always aligned with the executive team about what they're trying to accomplish and how HR can help.

Another big issue is, what does the employee experience look like at your company — from job candidate to onboarding to working there to off-boarding and the alumni experience. We need to think about those moments as much as we think about the business moments. They're critical to the culture of the company.

Bryant: What is it about your background that prepared you to operate in this challenging environment of the last few years?

Schmitz: I'm an engineer by background. I have a Master's in computer science and I started my career writing code. I then moved to product management, general management and eventually started running a P&L. I came to Zebra in 2016 as chief marketing officer, and now I'm the chief people officer.

Because of that background, I'm always focused on thinking about HR as a service organization — what does the business need from HR, and what do the employees need from HR? It also prepared me for being agile, because I've done lots of different things. Outside of finance, legal, and IT, I've worked in almost every area of the company.

Reimer: What is your playbook for building an effective team?

Schmitz: I'm a big fan of finding ways to build trust, and also being open and honest. If I don't agree with something, I will say something. If people don't agree with me, I want them to tell me. I try to use what I call the "boss card" very infrequently. There are times when, as the leader, you need to make a decision, but it's always better that you've vetted that out with the team, so that you fully understand the pros and cons.

Bryant: Were there experiences – good or bad — early in your life with managers that helped shape what good

leadership looks like for you?

Schmitz: You can always learn from your managers — sometimes it's what to do and sometimes it's what not to do. A good lesson is that most people don't like to be micromanaged. When you're working on a hard or urgent problem, you do have to get into that level of detail.

But there are times when you're going to have to entrust your people to get things done without you checking on them. I always say that you will get more out of somebody if you don't micromanage them. There are times when the leader has to get into the details, but you can't live there on a day-to-day basis. I've had my share of experiences of working for people who lived there.

Reimer: When you give people mentoring and coaching advice, what are common themes that come up?

Schmitz: Number one is to always be building the best possible team. There are a lot of ways to do that, and one of them is sometimes making the hard decision to let someone go because they're not going to help you get to the next level. If I ask an interview candidate, "Do you have any regrets in your management career?" often they'll say they kept a person in the wrong role for too long.

I also find that people sometimes struggle with feeling like they need to have the answers. But as you move into executive management, it actually becomes more important that you ask the right questions than trying to have all the answers. That approach also means you are going to be a bit more humble and let people come to the right conclusion.

Bryant: What other questions do you ask when you are interviewing job candidates?

Schmitz: I want to make sure someone has the relevant experience to do the job I'm asking them to do. So I'll often bring up a problem I'm working through and say, "How have you done this? How have you done that?" The key is to find a real example and keep asking questions to understand how much the person really knows about the problem.

I also ask about their team experiences. Tell me the best team you've ever been on. How did you contribute to the

team? What made it the best team? Have you ever been able to recreate that? I want to know you're going to be an awesome member of the team.

Reimer: As you think about the next generation of leadership, what are some of the qualities and skills that you think will be key to their success as leaders?

Schmitz: There was a time in my career when the ethos was more of a top-down approach to getting things done. It was about showing no weakness and "don't ever let them see you sweat." Now you're seeing a lot more teamwork, a lot more joint ownership, and I would add that more humility and vulnerability are highly valued. No leader knows everything. The successful leaders of today and tomorrow are vulnerable, and they admit what they do well along with where they can improve. They can take input. They can take feedback.

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