



Kimberly Newkirk

The Power of Asking For Help



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 Open Immersive Reader

Kimberly Newkirk, Chief Learning and Talent Officer at Liberty Mutual, shared smart insights with me and my colleague Adam Bryant, senior managing director at The ExCo Group.

Reimer: One of the big issues these days for HR seems to be the shifting expectations that employees have of their employers, and vice-versa. How do you think about that?

Newkirk: The context for me is that the environment and pace of change has intensified, particularly because of all the changes from the pandemic. Employees do have more expectations of their leaders now, and we have more data transparency about employee opinion.

So while you're trying to deliver results and profitability, you're also supposed to make sure people feel heard. But that also means that you're constantly bombarded with messaging about what you're not doing. That creates a challenge for leadership of balancing discipline and collaboration. But the skills haven't kept pace.

Bryant: What's your rubric for helping somebody to build that muscle?

Newkirk: It goes back to the fundamentals of leadership and having the confidence to lead. I always coach leaders to start with listening and taking in the feedback. You don't have to respond to everything, but you should see it as data to consider as you are constantly assessing your strategy.

If you have a good strategy with a logical argument behind it, and your key stakeholders are bought in, then you use the data to check whether you need to make any short-term adjustments. But you've got to have the confidence to stay the course and know that you're doing the right thing.

The final point is to make sure you're getting the right feedback from people who have all the data, and then see everything as more anecdotal data. I see some leaders get nervous at times and feel like they're heading in the wrong direction because of the short-term indicators.

I always advise people to keep the strategy simple enough, with a clear line of logic, so you can always revisit it to build your confidence, even as you're checking whether you are headed in the right direction. You have to keep it simple to keep it alive.

Reimer: What is it about your background that prepared you to operate in this kind of environment of the last few years, with so many new challenges?

Newkirk: I actually thrive in change and get excited by it. Earlier in my career, I worked at Intel in the Andy Grove era. The culture he created was not only about "only the paranoid survive," but it was about exploiting disruption and hard times to come out better on the other side. So I see disruption as an opportunity.

But not everyone is change-resilient. And so the challenge is

to not only be change-resilient yourself, but to bring others along to feel secure in the face of change. Disruption creates new market leaders. It's not the good times that build strength and capability. It's not the good times that create new market movers. It's the tough times. That's just in my bones, and I have had to realize that others didn't grow up with that perspective. You have to meet people where they are to help them to lead.

Bryant: What about earlier in your life? Important influences from that period that built your resilience?

Newkirk: My dad was a senior executive and commuted and was gone during the week. Because of my dad's job, we moved a few times, and so I had to learn to make friends in new schools. I was also an exchange student to New Zealand when I was in high school, and studied abroad there for a year. I got there and asked myself, "What did I just do?" You learn how to make the best of things, and that when things seem dark, it may actually be a life-changing event, and something wonderful is about to happen. I don't know where I'd be today if I hadn't done that.

A lot of it is figuring out how to move through the dark times, finding people to lean on and learning that people want to help you. That's the biggest power in the corporate world — asking for help. The ability to check your ego at the door and say, "I can't do this by myself," is really powerful. I learned that early on.

Reimer: When you mentor senior executives, are there other themes that come up, besides the ones you've mentioned already?

Newkirk: Leaders need to be aware of their blind spots by asking for feedback, and they have to realize that feedback is a gift. So reach out to people who really care about you and want to make you better. You do need to figure out how to deal with your blind spots because it's usually not your capability that will hold you back — it's your behavior and how well you show up.

We're now in a world where just delivering results isn't enough anymore. At the senior levels, leaders have to be able to check their ego and be empathetic and caring and

open. It's about being human and vulnerable. That's hard, but you have to have the confidence and strength to show vulnerability. So that's a new behavior that's expected of leaders, and it's a blind spot for some. It can be very uncomfortable if you're a high achiever and feel that you have to be perfect.

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