



Amanda Hughes

You Should Define Your Role Beyond Just The Job Description



Adam Bryant [in](#)

Senior Managing Director at The ExCo Group; Author, "The Leap To

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Amanda Hughes**, chief people officer of QBE Insurance, 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: What are some big issues in HR that are top of mind for you?

Hughes: One is the fact that people are living longer, and therefore the way we work and the relationship we have with our employers is going to need to change. If people are going to be working longer, that's going to change the way we think about retirement, four-day workweeks and giving

people sabbaticals. There's a lot of talk about re-skilling right now, but I don't think there's enough conversation going about the fundamental nature of work and the employment relationship.

Bryant: That relationship can seem like a tug-of-war at times these days.

Hughes: The relationship is different and will continue to evolve. I see it as a partnership, and employers are having to think about their employees as a whole person, in terms of mental health, wellbeing or skills that they need. That's what a lot of employees are looking for from their employers, as well. You can often get more loyalty and commitment if people really sense that their employer cares for them.

Reimer: Another layer of complexity for companies is how best to structure the workforce to accomplish the work that needs to be done.

Hughes: We're definitely trying to get away from thinking just in terms of job descriptions and people fitting certain boxes, because problems aren't coming to us that neatly fit in a box. The same with constructing a team — you need a combination of skills, but that mix can be very fluid. And to get those skills, do you develop existing employees? Where can you look for those skills? Do you need all those people employed full-time?

Bryant: What's your strategy for building a sense of alignment across the organization?

Hughes: We try as an organization to be as open and transparent as we can. And we are getting more layers of senior leaders involved by sharing information with them. One of the things we've done here is to create a group of 20 leaders who are like an extension of the executive team. We meet with them a couple of times a year in conjunction with the executive team, and we share most of the topics that in the past would have been just for the executive team and the board.

There's another group of 110 leaders below those levels who also receive greater information about the business. That might include pockets of the company that we want to

perform better. By doing that, we create more diversity of perspective and more of a sense that it's a shared problem to solve.

Reimer: What were some early leadership lessons for you?

Hughes: One was about not asking the team to do anything that you're not prepared to do yourself, and the benefit of working alongside the team. When I worked for one organization in London, and it was time to do some month-end work, the boss of our team would leave and we would stay in the office quite late, having to work quite hard.

But there was another team at the company doing similar work, but the leader of the team would stay with them during the crunch period to help them and solve problems. They'd finish their work so much earlier, and then the boss would often take them down to the bar after work for a drink.

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I could see the level of collaboration in the team, and how happy that team seemed to be compared to mine. That taught me the importance of being visible and spending time working alongside the team.

Bryant: If you were advising somebody who's new to the CHRO role, what are the top two or three pieces of wisdom you would share?

Hughes: When you step into that role, the spotlight is really on you, and you don't get a lot of chance to experiment. So if there are things you want to test about the way you lead, try to use your current role to do some of that experimentation before you actually get into the role.

Another piece of advice would be to be very thoughtful about balancing the need for quick, demonstrable action with longer-term strategic thinking. There's a lot of pressure when you're in these roles to quickly implement your plan. But you have to resist that pressure a little bit, so that you're not making knee-jerk reactions.

Finally, you have to make the time to invest in relationships and really listen to people up, across and down into the organization. You may come in with some ideas but it's important to get perspectives from other people because, one, they could be helpful and, two, it's also important for them to know that you're interested in their perspectives.

Reimer: How do you hire? What qualities are you looking for?

Hughes: I want to know whether they are someone who sees their job as a defined box, or do they see their job beyond that box? After all, roles are constantly changing, and the needs of the team are constantly changing. I also think a lot about self-awareness. What have they learned from their experience, and how have they adapted?

One of my favorite questions is to ask people, "What would bad look like? If you joined our company, what might make you think six months in that this was a bad move because it's the wrong role or wrong company?" It often provokes a strong reaction, and the answers can be quite revealing. Sometimes people get so caught up in selling themselves that they forget to think about what they want. If this is not the right job for them, I'd rather them come to that revelation quickly.

Bryant: How do you see the demands of leadership changing?

Hughes: In the past, managing and leading was more about the work and the goals and performance. We are now asking leaders to have so many different conversations with their employees — ways of working, whether it's in the office or remote, and to balance work and other parts of their lives. We're asking leaders to have more holistic conversations about wellbeing, and that doesn't sit comfortably for some leaders.

The breadth of topics that we are asking leaders to have conversations about has grown significantly. A lot of leaders didn't grow up with people asking them those questions. They're also still trying to grapple with their own mental health work-life balance, and juggling families and commutes and all sorts of things. Then we're asking them to

try and be the support person and have those conversations with their teams.

Reimer: You've done a lot of mentoring and coaching of senior executives. What are common themes of those conversations?

Hughes: One is about the need to be honest with people in their teams and have the difficult conversations. After all, it's often kinder to have the conversation than not to have the conversation. People are often conflict-avoidant or they don't want to have that conversation. So I will talk to them not only about how to have those conversations, but also try to get them to see it as a positive step to move the relationship or work forward.

The other one is to assume good intent. People often read emails and get frustrated. But sometimes people don't use the right words, so it's best to assume that they want to do the right thing for the team and the company. So assume their intent is good and respond in that same manner.

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