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Fiona Cicconi, CPO at Google on HR Challenges | Strategic CHRO

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Fiona Cicconi, Chief People Officer at Google, shares her key leadership lessons on how the role of the CEO has evolved, the impact of the AI revolution on HR, and other HR challenges with The ExCo Group's David Reimer and Adam Bryant in this Strategic CHRO interview.

Reimer: What are some top-of-mind HR challenges for you now?

Cicconi: One of many HR challenges right now is the role of the CEO and how it's evolved, given the massive upheaval we've had with the pandemic, macroeconomic changes, and geopolitical tensions. Over and above managing and leading a

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company, they must deliver for employees, shareholders, and other stakeholders. The CEO job has become several jobs in one.

And what should be top of mind for a board? What should be discussed in the boardroom, and what's the role of the people function in those discussions? We've been catapulted into the driver's seat. And then you've got the AI revolution on top of all of that. It's going to be pervasive across companies. What does that mean in your company? What does it mean for our function?

Bryant: What's your take on how AI can and will transform HR?

Cicconi: It is the biggest technology revolution we've seen in our lives. It's as big as when the internet was invented, maybe bigger. AI is going to be pervasive and powerful, and it will change a lot of how we work. We should embrace it just like we've done with many changes over the decades. I'm an optimist, and I think it will change our lives for the better, though we need to ensure we are handling it responsibly.

As our AI products mature and grow and learn, they'll become more accurate, and we'll be able to use them, for example, as help desks. And we'll be able to use generative AI to simplify a lot of information and what we write. In terms of the HR function, it will help us be even more present and be people first, because we'll have a lot of help from AI and we can really be there for those moments when we need to be there, rather than having to wade through a lot of administrative and operational work.

Reimer: You're a board director—at Stellantis—in addition to your CHRO role. What do CHROs need to understand about boards, and what do they need to understand about the CHRO role?

Cicconi: CHROs need to understand that boards are not management. Boards are there to really help when management needs them. Of course, there's an important governance role as well, but they are not management. And if board members ever try to start getting into management issues, it's confusing. It's important to stick to your role as a board member and find the right balance as you serve as a sponsor and cheer on the management team and give them strength, knowledge, and expertise.

And I am seeing a trend of more CHROs sitting on boards, which makes sense because massive cultural themes come up in every organization.

Bryant: What were early influences that shaped your ability to navigate all the HR challenges that come up every day in your role?

Cicconi: Early in my career, I worked in GE for a number of years, and Jack Welch believed that a CEO needed to have both a strong CFO and a strong people person. Through them, you see the flow of money and the people, organizational and cultural issues.

That was formative because he didn't see HR as an administrative role. It was much more of a strategic function. That really shaped how I run the people function. You don't do talent management just for the sake of talent management. You do it because the company needs a specific talent strategy to succeed.

Reimer: Let's shift the timeline to earlier in your life. What were important influences from when you were a kid?

Cicconi: I was a terrible rebel. As a child, I was sent to boarding school. At the time, we were living in Rome, Italy. My mom was working for the United Nations, and I loved the diverse international school I was in. It was a big shock to end up in

England on the freezing cliffs of the North Sea. After two weeks, I realized I needed to be a rebel to be included, so I started breaking all the school rules. I quickly became popular, was constantly punished, and was voted head girl when I was 18.

However, that difficulty in adhering to rules has helped me in the business world because I've often looked at policies and wondered if they could be simplified or necessary in the first place.

Bryant: Leadership in general has become more difficult these last few years. What do you think about the specific challenges facing front-line managers?

Cicconi: It is a complicated role. You're dealing with a lot, including macroeconomic uncertainty and navigating the challenges of hybrid work policies. Before someone becomes a manager, we want them to know what they are signing up for.

It's not an easy job. It's a serious responsibility; you can get it seriously wrong and make people miserable. Not everybody's good at it as well. And that's fine.

Reimer: When you coach and mentor leaders, are there a couple of themes that come up more often?

Cicconi: Across all generations, genders, and countries, I would say it's a self-confidence problem. It's quite chronic, whether it's based on a fear of being judged or other things. Obviously, everybody's different, but in general, I have found that people can be so unkind to themselves. There are these voices in your head that bring you down.

It's as if you're trying to swim freestyle in the ocean because you do have big waves to tackle in your job, but you've got this underwater seaweed around your ankles trying to pull you under the water. Those are the voices that are pulling you down, and you have to put a stop to those voices.

Instead, think about where you can put that energy to a greater purpose, whether it's somebody who needs your help or a situation that requires your attention. Imagine chopping away at all that underwater seaweed so that you can swim stronger and faster to tackle the waves.

Bryant: What key leadership lessons have you learned over your career?

Cicconi: One is to surround yourself with a great team. That is one thing you should not rush. And check the references yourself when you're hiring for your team. You will make some mistakes, but you should go deep to build that team really carefully.

Second, I would say be accessible and authentic. Get rid of the layers of shoe polish that we're told we need in the corporate world in the name of things like executive presence. Just be yourself because that's what's made you successful. Be generous with your time and energy and listen to the organization, listen to employees.

Third, it's so important for a leader to have people's backs. Of course, you have to give feedback to people, and it can be done in a constructive way. People have big jobs, and they are dealing with many challenges. And you've got to stick together and have each other's backs because things will go awry, and everybody makes mistakes sometimes. You can't succeed in an environment of fear or not knowing whether your leader has your back.

This interview with Fiona Cicconi, *Chief People Officer at Google*, on the evolving role of CEOs, the impact of the AI revolution on HR, and other HR challenges is part of our [Strategic CHRO](#) interview series featuring conversations with transformative HR leaders. [Join the conversation on LinkedIn.](#)