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Robert Toohey

If You Get The People Part Right, You Will Have a Great Business



Adam Bryant

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

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Robert Toohey, chief human resources officer at Allstate, 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 are the big issues on the horizon for you for the HR function?

Toohey: An obvious one is AI and its impact on work. It's not about eliminating jobs. It's about how you are going to use AI to the advantage of your business, for both employees and customers. HR is now figuring out how to retrain every

employee on the impact of AI. It's similar to how the advent of cloud computing changed our jobs. It will be the same with AI. Everything is going to shift, and we have an opportunity to help enable organizations to embrace it, use it the right way and to your advantage.

Another big question right now is how best to help managers and leaders. I have a firm belief that if you figure out how to develop managers and leaders, your company will operate much better. I've been doing this for 35 years. It all comes back to the fact that employees come to work and they want comfort, advice, and confidence from their managers and leaders.

Finally, I run HR like a business and I think of HR as a product. I have had the fortunate opportunities to run businesses. But I've gone back to HR because it's about the people. If your organization gets the people part right, you're going to have a great business. But you've got to think about HR as a product. You always have to ask yourself: is your customer going to buy it? HR loves to roll things out that people don't necessarily need. So how do you roll things out that they want to "buy?" Are these products that will help their business?

Technology has had a huge impact on our delivery model. Employees have never been treated like customers but now is the time to do it. I do everything on my mobile device, and we should use it to create a consumer-grade, easy and seamless experience for employees.

Bryant: So how do you create better leaders and managers?

Toohy: You've got to be adaptable and willing to take on change every day. If you're looking for a playbook of what to do every morning and how your day is going to go for the next 30 days, that's not going to happen. You need to be adaptable and comfortable with change management. You've got to be a great communicator. You have to be transparent.

I don't have the perfect answer for how you help develop managers and leaders. You need a different learning model. Training and development needs to be more about bringing

people from different parts of your business together and sharing experiences and lessons, and less about workshops where people say, "Here's what you should do in this situation." Experiential learning really matters. It's amazing how much you learn from sharing with each other.

Reimer: How did running a business influence your thinking on HR as a product?

Toohy: Too often I was the recipient of just getting things thrown over the fence for everybody to deal with. It often felt process-driven, to check a box. You hear people saying, "I've got to do this and this for HR this week." And so you start thinking, "Something is wrong with this." If it's about helping employees, we've got to go back to, what are we trying to achieve? What is the outcome that you want? And then let's figure that out together, and then do these things when they make sense.

When you are part of HR, you're responsible for a lot. You're spending a lot of money, and you've got to start thinking about it in that way—as an investment you're making in employees. What's the value proposition to employees when it comes to dollars and cents? Where and how do we spend that investment?

When you think about an employee, it's all about well-being—mind, body, health. How do you wrap all that together? We've got to make choices, and how do you best make those choices? Does the company decide? Do the employees decide? Do you let them make major choices about things like whether they get health care? There's an opportunity to change the dynamic of how it's always been done. It's not about what employees cost or what they are worth, but rather what is valuable to them.

Bryant: What is about your background that prepared you to lead in this time of endless disruption and uncertainty?

Toohy: Early in my career, I worked as an auditor, and you're trained to ask "why" about everything, which may lead you to better ways of doing things. Many years ago, the person who brought me into HR said to me, "You need to ask the same questions and do the same thing, just inside my shop versus outside. Ask why in everything we do."

That's been my DNA. I'm drawn to transformations, and I try to figure out how to help people go through them. You learn from each one. So hopefully by the time you're where I am now, you're starting to get it right.

Reimer: In all the mentoring that you do with senior executives, are there a couple of themes that come up over and over?

Toohey: One is about having direct conversations. I often ask, "Did you tell the other person? Did you talk to them about it?" Nine times out of ten, there's been a misunderstanding, and you can often clear things up just by talking.

Another common theme is being adaptable as a leader. If everyone was like you, the job would be really easy. That's why you're a leader. People often wonder, "Why don't they do what I want?" Because they're not you, and they're human. To get people to move, you have to accept doing things a little differently. Leaders can gain a lot from the 80/20 rule. If you just let teams do some things a little differently than you, you will have a better team and maybe even a better approach.

Bryant: What are some key leadership lessons you've learned in your career?

Toohey: I've learned some great lessons from different leaders over the years. One had a way of being really connected to employees, and he did a great job of motivating people through stories. He also knew how to tap into people's passion, and he let them run so they could do great work.

The guardrails that companies put on everybody is what restricts great employees. He had a knack for really pushing that envelope. It didn't always work. You've got to fix it when it doesn't work and then you move on. It's not about taking risk. It's about giving people more rope. Let them run.

Another CEO had the best trait of never using people's time the wrong way. If it was a real emergency, he wanted you there. But if it wasn't an emergency, he wasn't going to turn something into one just for him. I've seen leaders do that—

"I'm going to make you work Saturday on this project for me." But this particular prioritized, and he got the best out of everybody.

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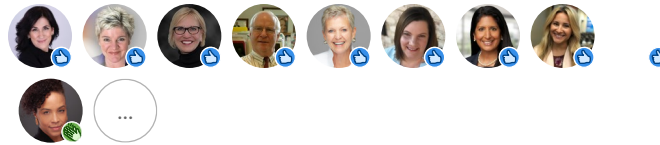
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Love this article - thank you for sharing Adam Bryant! What really stood out to me is when you notice people saying "I have to do this for HR..." and the assumed negative tone that is read with that statement. The reaction or perceived feeling of employees to HR requests speaks volumes about the cultural health. ...see more

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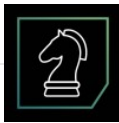
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