

Insights

In a world of disruption and constant change, where ambiguity is the norm, we actively drive conversations as thought leaders across multiple industries to generate insights that lead to pragmatic outcomes.

[ARTICLES](#)[BOOKS](#)[NEWS](#)[EVENTS](#)[SEARCH](#)

STRATEGIC CHRO



Belief System Leadership: Darrell Ford, CHRO of UPS | Strategic CHRO

December 8, 2023

Darrell Ford, chief human resources officer and chief DE&I officer at UPS, shares his “head, heart, hands” leadership model, how to lead through your belief system, HR’s role in leading difficult conversations, and more HR lessons with [The ExCo Group’s David Reimer](#) and [Adam Bryant](#) in this Strategic CHRO interview.

Reimer: What top-of-mind issues are on the horizon for you?

Ford: A big one is technology. Generative AI and large language models are here to stay. The question is: how do we harness and leverage that, and how do we also manage the related risks? Because it’s not a perfect technology. It’s got to fit in the context of how organizations operate. And how do we reimagine the HR function through an AI-powered digital lens?

Bryant: You’ve been a CHRO for a number of companies. How has the role evolved?

Ford: A lot of societal issues have come to the forefront. Many employees have also decided they don’t want to come to the office five days a week because it doesn’t work for their personal or family situations. The pendulum around flexibility and the social contract between employees and employers has shifted.

And there's no right or wrong answer per se. You must figure out what's right for your organization and strike that balance. The HR role is to encourage those hard conversations about our values, value creation, what's right for employees, and how best to navigate all these issues.

The second big one is the conversation around race, race relations, and corporate responsibility. For example, after the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others, many of our employees were telling us, "I'm not okay." So, you now start to think more about wellbeing and mental health. That brought a lot of conversations to the forefront about what it means for us to lead in this environment and create space for very difficult conversations.

Reimer: What do you think about the challenge of continuing a pragmatic discussion around race in such a charged political environment in this country?

Ford: It starts with going back to your values and getting anchored. How do you do the things that you do? What is the outcome that you're looking to achieve? What's the basis for your belief system? As we like to say here at UPS, "We're not red, we're not blue, we're brown," and we need to think through that lens to help us navigate.

You come back to what's right for us. We know that what's right for us is to stay the course. We also know that our company is led by one of the few female CEOs in the Fortune 500, Carol B. Tomé. Our board is diverse: 42 percent women and 33 percent people of color. Our leadership team is diverse: one-third are people of color, and one-third are women. And that cascades down through the organization.

Bryant: What is it about your background that prepared you to navigate this environment of endless disruption?

Ford: I'm the oldest in my family. Son of a New York City police officer and former Air Force. My mother was an administrative assistant who worked up to assistant vice president on Wall Street. And I was the oldest of three by five and ten years, respectively. So, in our household, my parents put me in charge if they weren't there. You develop those broad shoulders that come with being the oldest.

I was also the captain of my high school track team. I'm still friends with those guys today. Four of them live in Atlanta, and we get together on a regular basis. And they've told me I've always been this way—coaching people, inspiring them, and encouraging them to take on new challenges.

Reimer: Were there a few lessons that informed your leadership style early in your career?

Ford: When I worked at Bell South, I had a manager, Roy McAllister, who was a coach and mentor to me. He identified early on that I had the aptitude for leadership, and he helped me hone that. He taught me about gratitude and that leadership is not about you; it's about helping others.

Another important lesson was about starting early to develop talent. You've got to play the long game. With talent management, the talent pipeline, and diverse talent, the outcomes that we have today at our company didn't happen last quarter – they've happened over the course of years. It's crucial to do long-term planning for developing and promoting talent.

Bryant: What's your framework for evaluating potential future leaders at your company?

Ford: We've talked a lot about setting expectations around what good looks like for our leaders—for our executive team and those who aspire to be part of it. And we coined the expression "head, heart, hands," which is really our leadership model. It's that simple. We can teach it to anybody.

It's about strategizing with your head, inspiring with your heart, and then delivering with your hands. And it's about how you balance those. You can over-focus on delivery and miss the ability to look around corners. You can over-focus on inspiration and not get anything done. We think that's a good way of striking that balance and communicating what good leadership looks like.

And when I'm interviewing people, I ask them about their values and why they are theirs. I then discuss whether they are aligned with who we are as a company and our expectations. You can quickly tell who has spent time reflecting on that question versus those who sound like they are reading off a PowerPoint slide.

Reimer: What are the one or two themes that come up most often when you are mentoring people?

Ford: If I had to pick one or two themes, it's usually an affirmation of confidence in them that they can do it, they can achieve, and then giving encouragement. Often, it comes up when individuals are doing something for the first time—presenting to the CEO or the board or leading a big project, for example. They often need some affirmation that "You've got this, you can do it." Then, I provide some coaching to fine-tune their approach.

I also use a lot of open-ended questions when I'm mentoring people so that, ideally, they get to the insight themselves. One of the things I'm most proud of is that now there are at least nine other CHROs who have worked for me at some point.

Bryant: What is your advice to the business world more broadly about how to build a diverse leadership team?

Ford: It starts with the leader. If the leader wants it and believes in it, things tend to happen. If they're providing lip service or not committed to it, things tend not to be successful. It's a belief system and then you put in policies and practices to reinforce that in order to deliver the desired outcome.

I think back on how Ursula Burns became CEO at Xerox. It was not an accident—early career planning, talent management, right exposure, right time, right place, right set of responsibilities with accountability, and then proven performance. She became CEO because the company believed in diversity and made the intentional investments for that to occur.

So, it starts with the belief system. If you're giving it lip service, people know. If it's just a slogan for you, people know. You're not fooling anyone. You're especially not fooling anyone in the diverse community who lives with these issues day in and day out. You don't have to be perfect. It's really about the journey and whether you are getting continuously better. If you adopt that mindset, you tend to get better outcomes.

This interview with [Darrell Ford](#), chief human resources officer and chief DE&I officer at [UPS](#), on how to lead through your belief system and more HR lessons is part of our [Strategic CHRO](#) interview series featuring conversations with transformative HR leaders. [Join the conversation on LinkedIn.](#)



Adam Bryant
Senior Managing
Director and
Partner



David Reimer
CEO