



How To Differentiate Your Talent Strategy In An AI World? Culture. | Kelly Pereira

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Kelly Pereira, CHRO at RBC, shares her key talent lessons on uniting people with a common purpose and differentiating your talent strategy in an AI world in this Strategic CHRO interview with The ExCo Group's David Reimer and Adam Bryant.

Reimer: What big issue is top of mind for you these days?

Pereira: The potential impact of generative AI on HR—including predicting skill needs and creating learning-development opportunities—is a meaty topic. A question it raises is around how to differentiate your talent in an AI world. If AI is going to level the playing field a bit in terms of technical skills, and everybody starts to become more of a generalist, then what does that mean for a differentiated talent strategy?

The answer is to focus less on the what and more on the how. How do you make your culture so empowering, so different, so innovation-friendly that people really want to work at your company? Yes, you'll be able to speed up their technical capability development, but ultimately, it's about attracting talented people who want to work with smart, motivated people with great ideas in a culture of innovation.

Bryant: What are the implications of that for what it means to be a good leader?

Pereira: Some things haven't changed, including the ability to get the best out of people. Employees want to have trust, to be empowered, to do interesting work, and they want to have meaningful career opportunities.

What separates great leaders now is their ability to get the best out of people across a broad range of domains. They don't necessarily need to be experts on various topics, but they value diversity and understand how to build effective teams.

For CEOs, it means they have to be able to create strategic, inspirational, and enterprise leadership. In terms of their personal attributes, to what extent are they able to rethink how to be a successful leader? How curious are they?

How do they drive outcomes in a large-scale organization without understanding certain domains? Technology can democratize many of these senior roles and open new pathways for nontraditional candidates as long as you understand the implications of transformation and technology.

Reimer: Adding to the challenge of leadership are all the divisive issues in the world at large.

Pereira: Yes. How do you take a stand on important and often divisive issues but unite people through a common purpose? The ability for leaders to find that common purpose that unites us and then keep coming back to that without falling into the trap of divisiveness is key.

It's about saying, "We may not all agree on everything. We may have different sociopolitical views, but here's what unites us and creates a core common vision of why you all want to work here." That's always been important, but perhaps more so now, given all the challenges in the external environment.

Bryant: What is about your wiring, your background, that enables you to not only survive but thrive in this kind of ambiguous environment?

Pereira: I'm an optimist, and I always have been. I tend to see the world as more positive than negative, and I always try to find a path through things. I like to solve problems; the more complex, the better. When I was a little girl, I solved puzzles, and now I feel like I still have puzzles, but they're people.

I find it energizing. When we sit in a senior meeting, and the dynamics may be complicated, and there are tensions and emotions, I enjoy every minute of that. If you don't, this work will make you tired and weary.

Earlier in my career, I was on the business strategy side, so I took a slightly less traditional path to HR. But I've found that people's problems are the most fascinating. How do we bring people along through change? How do we hire the right people? What does the workforce look like in the future?

Reimer: How do you hire?

Pereira: First and foremost, I look for organizational ambition over individual ambition. We want people to come with their own career ambitions, but I want people genuinely excited about banking and working at RBC. Do they feel excited about what the organization could be?

Then, I focus on more of their personal attributes rather than their experience. Are they curious? Can they manage their emotional response, listen, and internalize feedback? Are they confident? Can they be resilient and optimistic?

Are they driven more by outcomes than by status? Do they understand the impact of their behavior, both within and beyond the business? Then, I will move toward trying to understand whether they can articulate a compelling strategy. Are they willing to put a tough idea out there?

Bryant: Do you have some favorite questions that you like to ask?

Pereira: One is, what truly motivates you? When you really step back and put your hand over your heart, what makes you get up every day? People's answers to those questions are very interesting and insightful because they are hard to answer inauthentically. That question hits pretty deep.

And I will often ask people, what frustrates you most? When you're having a bad day, what is it that frustrates you? I'm listening to whether they are talking about a problem or people. Not that there's a right answer, but some people can get very frustrated with other people. I'm listening more for an answer like, "I'm really trying to solve this, but I'm having trouble figuring it out."

I also like to ask, "Tell me about a time when you didn't act within your values. What's something that you did that you wish you hadn't? What was the leadership lesson you learned from that?"

Reimer: What were other early influences for you? What were you like as a kid?

Pereira: When I was young, I challenged things. I challenged teachers. I challenged my parents. I was not an easy child. I had opinions, and I did get in trouble a fair amount. I once staged a small protest at my school because I didn't like something happening there, and I got people together to rally against it.

So, I was definitely a disruptor when I was younger. I had very strong opinions about the world and what I thought we could do and where I would make a difference. I would say that's probably similar to how I am now. I'm just a bit more thoughtful about it.

Bryant: What are the themes that come up most often when you're coaching senior executives about things that can trip them up or hold them back?

Pereira: The first is that you have to have an opinion. I often find executives can fall into the trap of thinking, "I need to make everybody happy, so I'm going to try to take everybody's opinion into account." And so I will say to them, "You're losing people because they don't know what you stand for. So you have to stand for something. You have to have an opinion."

The second one is that these roles are going to be ambiguous. There is nothing clean and clear about senior-level jobs. There is no clear path. Your role isn't clear. It's always going to overlap someone else's job. Someone is always going to be annoyed with you. You're always going to be annoyed with someone. That's the way it is. So, get comfortable with ambiguity and be able to navigate that.

The third theme is that people sometimes lack a clear vision of what they're trying to achieve. So don't just go through the steps. Really know in your mind, "This is what I'm trying to get to. This is what the future looks like." Paint a picture of what the future is and tell that story over and over because the people who get lost the most are the people who have lost that vision.

This interview with Kelly Pereira on talent strategies and leading with a common purpose is part of Strategic CHRO, our interview series with transformational HR leaders. Subscribe for more talent insights.