



HR Is Playing A Greater Role Now In Driving Cross-Cultural Collaboration in Organizations

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In this Strategic CHRO interview, Audrey Grimm, Chief HR and Diversity Officer at Corteva Agriscience, shares her HR leadership strategies for facilitating cross-functional collaboration and more practical lessons with The ExCo Group CEO David Reimer and Senior Managing Director and Partner Adam Bryant.

Reimer: What do you consider a growing and relatively new responsibility for HR leaders?

Grimm: HR leaders and our teams play a much bigger role in facilitating cross-functional collaboration. It started during COVID-19, but it has accelerated because there are so many topics that are not necessarily within a certain function but touch so many different areas and have to be looked at from an enterprise level. HR is often a catalyst for that functional collaboration. AI is an example. We have to think about AI for HR but also AI for the enterprise and how we can facilitate those conversations.

Fostering that cross-cultural collaboration starts with establishing trust with your peers in the organization. Everyone around the table has to feel comfortable and know that the only agenda is to work together to help make the enterprise successful. Sometimes, you need only one success story to be a catalyst for others. If you have one proof point where cross-collaboration works well, then that can create a virtuous cycle. But you have to be very intentional at the beginning.

Bryant: Many companies embrace the notion of a “one company” to get people aligned, but making it real, not just a slogan, is a challenge. What’s your playbook?

Grimm: People are always looking for proof points. It’s a “show me” story. You can put up a nice slide about the culture you want, but you need examples of how the leadership behaves to cascade that culture down through the organization. Role modeling is so important, and so is the messaging.

What are those intentional decisions that we are going to make to support the words and story that we are telling? We often underestimate the power of small moments and the degree to which people interpret and dissect decisions and how people behave. You have to be consistent in everything you do.

Reimer: To be a CHRO requires a comfort level with disruption and ambiguity. Where does that come from for you?

Grimm: I’ve been with the company, through mergers and spinoffs, for 20 years, and there is a mindset here of looking at the art of the possible and pushing boundaries. When you spend two decades in that environment, it does impact the way you look at things. I’ve also lived in many different countries, influencing how you stay open to change and different perspectives. You’re not getting comfortable when you move every three to four years. You restart your life.

Bryant: What about key influences from earlier in your life?

Grimm: I grew up in a small village in eastern France with about 900 people and probably as many cows. It was a rural farming community, and you learn the importance of relationships. You know everyone, and it’s part of your daily life. That stayed with me.

Reimer: What’s the most important leadership lesson you learned from the worst manager you ever had?

Grimm: I’ve seen leaders who lacked self-awareness, which then leads to bad behaviors that can have a big impact on a team’s ability to succeed. One leader in particular was pushy and tended to beat up on people. To this day, I’m not convinced that he saw it that way, and that’s because he lacked self-awareness.

I don’t necessarily believe it was intentional, but how that person led his team created an atmosphere of fear. People were not speaking up, and they were sheltering in place because they were afraid of being the next person he would beat up.

That was an unhealthy environment, and I realized how much it was impacting what I was doing and how I was doing it. I didn’t take any risks. I just wanted to get by and stay under the radar. It affected my performance. Because of that, I never wanted to make anyone feel the same way when I was in a leadership role.

Bryant: You’ve undoubtedly done a lot of coaching and mentoring of senior executives. What themes come up most often?

Grimm: Trust and authenticity come up a lot. I firmly believe in building trust and being authentic if you want your team to follow you in good and bad times. If you need them to walk through fire with you, you have to establish that foundation of trust. Again, a big part of that is self-awareness and understanding how your behavior ultimately impacts the culture.

The reality is that people are watching us very closely at the C-suite level. They look at what we do, what we say, how we say it, what we choose to say, and what we choose not to say. We have to be very aware of that day-to-day.