



Successful Leaders Can Thrive In Uncertainty, With Clarity of Vision

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Kristy Feldkamp, SVP of Talent & Learning at HP, shares the top abilities leaders need today, including the ability to thrive in uncertainty and having an enterprise-wide mindset.

This interview is part of our X-Factor Leadership series featuring conversations with heads of talent and learning at leading corporations with The ExCo Group CEO David Reimer and Senior Managing Director and Partner Adam Bryant.

Reimer: What are the X-factors that set apart the best leaders today?

Feldkamp: The first is having an enterprise-wide mindset and an external perspective. We also look for leaders who can thrive in uncertainty, with clarity of vision and resilience. Another area is the ability to unlock talent. How are you setting people up for success? How are you developing your teams? How are you creating shared purpose and focus on your team? Those are the three differentiators for folks at HP.

We have found that thinking at the enterprise level can be particularly challenging because of daily business demands. HP operates in a highly competitive, innovation-driven industry, and we are very tied to quarterly earnings, so our leaders tend to be more operationally focused. We have to have people who can think across the enterprise. When they do, they stand out.

Bryant: There are so many demands on leaders today. What else do they need to do to build followership?

Feldkamp: We help our leaders refine their storytelling, particularly around their purpose, because you build connections with people by telling a story about yourself. It invites vulnerability very organically. So, we help leaders write and comfortably tell that story and allow them to build those connections.

The purpose piece is important, as well, because it spans generations, cultures, and roles. It's something that everybody can rally around. I haven't met a person who doesn't want to have purpose in their work and to feel valued and recognized for that.

Reimer: What were early influences that, in hindsight, helped prepare you for your work?

Feldkamp: I've always been intensely curious about human behavior, how people interact, and what motivates them. Once I got into the professional world, I saw the outsized impact that a leader can have on a team and the outsized impact that a high-functioning team can have on an organization.

Bryant: Did anything spark your interest in human behavior early on?

Feldkamp: I had a lot of divorce in my family. My parents divorced when I was young. And then, they both remarried and divorced again in my middle school years. So it was a lot of figuring out who the players are, how are things coming together, what's my role, how is my family evolving, and what's my place in it.

Part of it was navigating my place in the world and finding what anchors me. Being able to read people, the room, and the dynamics of how people are connecting with each other or not was very much fine-tuned in my early years.

Reimer: Was there a leader early in your career who greatly impacted you?

Feldkamp: My first professional role was at Ford Motor Company, and the head of HR there at the time was David Murphy. He was very authentic. He said difficult things that, in some cases, were unpopular. I remember being in a session with him where a lot of people were new to the company and the professional world.

Someone asked him about work-life balance, and he said, "Well, you're making a choice. Getting to these levels in the company is like being a professional athlete or musician. You are consciously saying that you will dedicate a certain number of hours, and that's the reality."

Some people did not like that answer, and they challenged him on it, saying that he wasn't being inclusive. But he held firm and spoke from his perspective, his experience, and his values in a very honest way. My two biggest leadership values are courage and connection. You have to have the courage to say hard things. It's important when you're at a more junior level, but it becomes even more important the higher you go.

Bryant: When you coach senior executives, what are the common patterns? What are the unlocks they need?

Feldkamp: One common theme is self-awareness. The higher up you go in an organization, the less feedback you get, and people often aren't honest. It goes back to courage and why it's so important for those of us in the human resources function to be that person who shares with the leader what people are saying about them. When I have had coaching conversations with very senior leaders over the years, it's often been about helping them understand their impact on individuals and teams.

Reimer: Is there an assumption, practice, or methodology in the HR field that you think needs to be revisited or reframed?

Feldkamp: Career paths are not linear. This has been a trend, but I think it will accelerate. That means leaders will increasingly be managing people doing jobs they have never done themselves. That shifts leaders' focus to be more of a coach than a manager.

At Ford, I did a rotation early in my career in finance. I had a master's degree in labor and industrial relations and wanted to build my financial acumen. It was also my first people manager role, which stretched me in many ways.

When it was time to move on to another role, somebody on my team who had worked in the function his entire career said, "You are the best manager I've ever had." I said, "Really? Wow. Why?" He said, "You didn't micromanage me. You didn't get into my work daily. You empowered me; you let me do my job." It was a great early lesson.

Bryant: When hiring, do you have a favorite job interview question?

Feldkamp: I ask, "What are you not getting in the role or company you're in now that you want to get at HP or in your next role?" I want to understand people's motivating factors. This gives me a sense of what drives them and their purpose, and it also helps me understand how I can support their development as they come into the role.

Reimer: What advice do you share with young people as they consider a career?

Feldkamp: When you're young and trying to figure out what you want to do, people often think in terms of their forever job and finding their passion. Those two things can feel overwhelming to a young person. So, I share with them the expression, "Pay attention to what you pay attention to." What are you curious about? What are the things you find yourself drawn to, that you're interested in, that you enjoy?

How could you think about creating opportunities around those for the next couple of years, whether that's through education, internships, or seeking out mentors? I like to keep the discussion small and digestible because taking on big questions like what you want to do with your life can feel very daunting.