



I Avoid The Term “Benchmarking” Because It Is Outdated And Limiting. I Want To Raise The Bar.

July 31, 2024

Kitty Chaney-Reed, Chief Leadership, Culture, and Inclusion Officer at IBM, shared timely insights on the human side of leadership, benchmarking in HR, and how to inspire people to follow you in this interview with The ExCo Group’s CEO, David Reimer, and Senior Managing Director and Partner, Adam Bryant.

This interview is part of our X-Factor Leadership series featuring conversations with heads of talent and learning at leading corporations.

Reimer: You spent many years in operations roles before becoming chief leadership, culture, and inclusion officer last year. What has been your approach, broadly speaking, in this role?

Chaney-Reed: I have always been very focused on people and how I show up as a leader. Oftentimes, this aspect of leading—the human side—is overlooked. I think it’s making a comeback. People these days care about making a difference. They care about integrity and principle. I believe the work we are doing sets the expectation for how we show up as leaders and how we enable employees to do their best work. I believe this approach can absolutely make a difference, both in terms of revenue growth and our positioning in the marketplace.

Bryant: You mentioned the human side is making a comeback. When was it prominent for you?

Chaney-Reed: I've been in leadership roles since I was 21 years old, so it's been a long journey for me. I started out as a manager in a department store chain. In its executive training program, we were taught about the importance of the human aspects of leading. It was big in the '80s. Then, that began to taper off in the 2000s, and leadership started to become more academic. That was my observation.

Now, I see companies looking for differentiators, and many of them are trying to make a brand out of how they treat their people, how their people show up, and the cultures they're able to cultivate. So, when I say the human side of leadership is making a comeback, I mean more companies are looking back and saying, "What are we missing?" And now they've stitched together this new concept of the employee value proposition, which must be really compelling as they compete for talent, especially for the future generations entering the workforce.

Reimer: What do you see as the key differentiators of leaders?

Chaney-Reed: We've done a lot of work around something we're calling the IBM leadership behaviors. It's compelling, but I'm going to step away from that for a minute and share my personal thoughts on leadership. A few things in particular have worked for me and have set me apart as a leader.

The first is that I genuinely care about people. And that ingredient is a must for people to lead effectively. You must care about people more than you care about yourself and even more than you care about the outcomes because you can't accomplish anything without people.

You also have to be able to inspire people to follow you. You have to win their hearts and minds because we've always asked people to do really difficult things, and that isn't going to change. If they don't believe in the people they're following, then it's a lost cause. The third thing is that people like winners. People like leaders who they know can get things done. They want to be associated with success and successful people. To me, all roads lead to those three things in terms of leadership today.

Bryant: What was an important early leadership lesson for you?

Chaney-Reed: My first leadership lesson is one that I will take to my grave. It changed who I was and how I thought about leadership. In department stores, there are often busy days when you want as many people as possible out on the floor helping customers. One woman who worked for me, who was old enough to be my grandmother, was working in the stockroom on a particularly busy day.

When I saw her in there, I very forcefully said, "What are you doing in here?" She said, "I'm working." I said, "Well, you need to be out there, not in here." She said, "Okay." And she went out and did exactly what I asked her to do. Keep in mind that the stockroom, which was also my office, was a small room that was always immaculate. I had never wondered how it stayed so immaculate.

The following week, I went to open the door to the stockroom, and it was hard to get in. So I tracked her down and said, "Why is my office so full of stuff, and why can't I open the door?" She said, "Well, there are these things called 'return to vendor.' When I'm in that little room, that's what I'm doing. I'm making sure that all of the things that are returned to the store get returned to the vendor. And I also receive the stock and I'm the person who makes sure it gets out on the floor. While you're off doing your manager things, this is what I'm doing for you. But I can't do that anymore because you asked me to stay out here. So, that's what I've been doing."

I said, "I'm so sorry. I apologize." And she said, "It's okay, but I'll just stay out here." And then the stock piled up and I had to work overtime to try to get it out. She was a pro at it, and of course, I didn't realize that. To make up for my bad behavior and win her over, I spent a lot of time with her on the floor, talked to her about her grandkids, and learned that she loved banana bread. I brought her homemade banana bread and apologized in the best way that I knew how. She understood I was young and eventually forgave me and went back to doing the work she knew was important to the team's success.

The lessons I learned are that you have to know everybody's role on the team, you have to respect that role and you have to leverage people for their strengths and use them appropriately.

Reimer: What's the most valuable leadership moment you've ever experienced from a bad manager?

Chaney-Reed: This one was a real wake-up call for me. It was around the value of caring. Early in my career, my new manager wanted me to meet him for breakfast. It was a long drive, it was pouring rain, and I arrived a few minutes late. I sat down, and he said, "Look, I'm done. I've already eaten. I just want to set the record straight. At the end of the day, I don't care who you know. I don't care who likes you or who you like. All I care about is outcomes. Here's your sales target for the year: either you hit it, or you don't. If you hit it, great. If you don't, you're out." He put a \$20 bill on the table, and he left.

I had a couple of thoughts after he walked out. First, I was going to show him that I can do this job. My second thought was, what a horrible person! I then thought, maybe there is something wrong in his life for him to be this much of a jerk to me. So, I made it my mission during the time I worked for him to figure out if he was really an awful person or if he was just having a bad day. I give everybody a lot of grace, so I decided that maybe he was just having a bad day. Ultimately, we developed a strong working relationship. The lesson for me was that you never know what people are going through, and you have to give people the benefit of the doubt. But it was by far my worst first interaction with a boss.

Bryant: You've undoubtedly done a lot of mentoring and coaching over the years with senior executives. Any particular themes that come up often?

Chaney-Reed: One is knowing how to respond in difficult people-related situations. Leaders these days are not as equipped as I would expect them to be when it comes to handling difficult people situations and responding to statements like, "I don't want to come to the office. I'm not interested in doing that." Or, "What's your position on the Ukraine war?" Or, "Why are we supporting LGBTQ Pride Month?"

Not everybody has the skills to handle those conversations. Or if they do have those skills, they are often not comfortable exercising them because they're afraid they're going to get in trouble, whether it's being sued or called out on social media. That's tough.

Balancing authenticity with caring and pragmatism in a business setting is often very difficult. So I coach people to, number one, listen carefully. You have to show empathy, but you also have to be comfortable taking a stance. You have to do it in an empathetic way but also with clarity so that people aren't confused about where you stand. Often, people just want clarity.

Another theme starts with the fact that leaders often get promoted into very senior roles because of how they've performed in the past. What we're betting on is that they can take that success and scale

it to a broader audience or to a different part of the business. But letting go of doing the actual work and leveraging the strengths of the broader organization is hard for a lot of leaders. They often need help scaling and applying their skills in a new situation.

Reimer: In your assessment work, what long-standing ideas from the HR world have outlived their usefulness or need some refinement?

Chaney-Reed: I love data, and I have a CEO and a CHRO who love data, so I do share data but in a different frame. I don't look at it as benchmarking, nor do I present it as such. When I do share data, I do it with the idea of providing context—here's what other companies are doing and not doing.

But I avoid using the term “benchmark” because I think it's outdated and it's limiting. I don't want to be on par with someone else. I don't want to look at what someone else has done historically and aim for that. I want to raise the bar in a way that is informed by, but not limited by, information about what others have done. I think that's a pitfall for a lot of companies that are always trying to figure out how to be just a bit better than, say, Microsoft or Apple or some company in their industry.

I wake up every morning thinking, “How can I break that paradigm? How can I do something that wows the rest of the world and causes them to have to catch up?” It's liberating and it causes our teams to think about how they innovate in ways that maybe they haven't thought of before. I'm not afraid to try things that haven't been tried before.

Bryant: What was an important influence from early in your life?

Chaney-Reed: I have a great mother. She is as tough as nails, and she set a very high bar. She was a nurse and worked the night shift, so my brother and I were often home in the evenings alone. And she had this list of things that you never did, including, “You never call me at work unless somebody's dying or unless it's a real emergency.”

And I will always remember these words that she shared with me: “Nobody is going to give you anything. You have to earn it. Sometimes, that looks different for you than it does for other people. I can't figure it out for you. Nobody can figure it out for you. You have to figure it out on your own.”

So, I attribute a lot of my success to being willing to define what's necessary to achieve, what I should avoid, and what's required to thrive. Not being afraid was something that she instilled in me. The level of courage my mom has, and the level of courage she required of me, is a big reason I am who I am today.