



# To Develop Your Leadership Voice, Start By Listening Attentively To What Is Truly Important

September 30, 2024

***Olesea Azevedo, Chief Administrative Officer at AdventHealth, shares her key leadership lessons in this Strategic CHRO interview with The ExCo Group CEO David Reimer and Senior Managing Director and Partner Adam Bryant. She emphasizes the importance of practicing attentive listening leadership and discusses strategies for engaging new generational talent.***

Reimer: What early influences prepared you for the kind of role you have now, with so much ambiguity and new challenges?

Azevedo: I came to the United States from Moldova by myself when I was 14 to attend high school. I considered myself very fortunate to receive a tuition scholarship, knowing that my parents couldn't afford to pay for school, and could give me only \$300 as spending money for the entire year.

With those circumstances, every turn was a new challenge: learning a new language, navigating high school as a teenager, and a new job to help support myself. This experience taught me grit, curiosity, perseverance, and a reliance on others for wisdom and counsel.

Bryant: Could you share more about the circumstances that brought you to the United States?

Azevedo: Once I learned there might be an opportunity to get that scholarship, I was determined to get it. I argued with my parents for three months to let me pursue it. My dad said, "You're out of your mind if

you're going to think I'm going to let a 14-year-old go to a different country alone.”

I eventually told him, “Please give me this chance and trust me with our family’s legacy.” He was right; it was incredibly difficult in the beginning, but it was a tremendous opportunity for our entire family. We are so fortunate that my parents moved to the United States a few years later and can enjoy seeing their grandchildren grow.

Reimer: How do those experiences shape your leadership style today?

Azevedo: I embrace the duty of setting a clear vision for me and the team. My early experiences, where solutions were not readily available, taught me the invaluable lesson of depending on others for partnership, support, and insights. Building trusting relationships became paramount, allowing me to learn from diverse perspectives and wisdom. This approach of seeking collective intelligence and actively listening to others has been a cornerstone of my career.

Bryant: What big issues are top of mind for you these days?

Azevedo: The new generation of talent entering our organization possesses a distinctly different mindset, compelling us as leaders to engage with them and leverage their innovative thinking. We have the opportunity to capture their attention in remarkably brief moments, often measured in seconds rather than minutes. Additionally, there is a delicate balance between fostering individual focus and nurturing teamwork. We must strive to create an environment that not only captivates their interest but also focuses on collective purpose and contributions.

Another pivotal area is artificial intelligence, which I firmly believe will be transformative. I advocate for its ethical use and believe we should explore its full potential to enhance workforce effectiveness and efficiency.

The third theme pertains to fostering civility in the workplace. In an era marked by external divisions, leaders face the challenge of uniting an organization around a shared mission, purpose, and vision. The path to achieving this lies in consistently communicating the organization’s purpose and always inspiring individuals to rally around a common cause.

Bryant: When you coach and mentor executives, are there common themes that come up?

Azevedo: It is essential to recognize that leaders, like everyone else, harbor aspirations and face personal challenges. While this may seem rudimentary, it underscores the importance of being a good listener and posing thoughtful questions. During my career, I had the opportunity to learn coaching skills, which illuminated the profound impact of asking a few open-ended questions.

In today’s fast-paced environment, it is rare to encounter someone who will set aside their phone, fully engage in the moment, and truly listen to what is being said. Such attentiveness, accompanied by the ability to ask insightful questions, often helps leaders arrive at the answers they intuitively know but need a trusted confidant to confirm they are on the right path.

The other observation is the intensifying pressure to deliver results amidst an ever-accelerating pace of change. Leaders are now expected to spearhead multiple initiatives simultaneously. Consequently, guidance on prioritizing critical tasks aligned with the organization’s direction becomes essential. An HR leader’s role includes assisting the organization in identifying the most impactful objectives and helping employees internalize this understanding, fostering enduring outcomes and meaningful achievements.

Bryant: Is there a good leadership lesson you learned from a not-so-good leader?

Azevedo: One leader, when given a team-developed idea or presentation, would demand endless revisions, often reducing final changes to mere personal nitpicks. This approach demoralized the team rather than fostering a sense of achievement. In the pursuit of perfection, the team's morale shouldn't be a casualty.

Reimer: What X-factors set the best leaders apart these days?

Azevedo: In my opinion, it starts with cultivating and sustaining trusting relationships. It involves making deposits in the relational bank accounts well before any withdrawals are needed, fostering meaningful connections across various levels of the organization. I've learned from a mentor to end my conversations with, "How else can I support you?".

The second essential trait is an insatiable curiosity and a passion for continuous learning. Leaders must perpetually seek ways to innovate and improve. This innovative spirit should be applied at every level, from the ground up, as all leaders are expected to transform their functions rather than merely maintain them. In today's dynamic environment, virtually no role is purely maintenance-oriented.

The third distinguishing factor is the ability to have a voice, which paradoxically stems from being an attentive listener. Some assume that having a voice requires being the extrovert who dominates every meeting. However, true influence and contribution come from listening intently to others and then offering insights that genuinely make a difference. By listening carefully, leaders can understand what is most important to others, thereby gaining a broader perspective that extends beyond their immediate area of responsibility.