



A Key Priority For Leaders: Understand What Your Employees Need To Be Successful

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Achim Braun, chief human resources officer at Hitachi Energy, shares his key leadership lessons on navigating uncertainty in leadership in this Strategic CHRO interview with The ExCo Group CEO David Reimer and Senior Managing Director and Partner Adam Bryant.

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

Braun: One topic I've always been very passionate about is leadership and the role of the leader. Many people, in my view, are far too focused on operational things and not focused enough on leadership. To me, that means asking, what do I need to do as a leader to empower my team and enable them to perform?

I sometimes meet leaders who have a very rigid approach to leadership—they say, "This is how I do it." And I always ask them, "Do you ever think about the fact that every person on your team needs different leadership from you?" It seems obvious, but I still meet a lot of leaders who don't think about this.

Bryant: How did this become so important to you?

Braun: I realized this working for a leader who was very different from me. I enjoy thinking through things on my own, and I have no problem if a boss disagrees with me. But this leader's preference

was to regularly tell me what he thought I should do. One day, I told him, “Hey, I really want to do this myself. I don’t want to talk to you all the time about it. It doesn’t help me.”

And he said, “Well, Achim, I think it’s important that you get my input, and I insist that we speak every week.” That simply was something I couldn’t deal with, and that’s why our relationship failed. It annoyed me so much that I left the company. But it taught me the importance of leaders understanding what their people need to be successful.

Reimer: Given all the disruption in the world, what new pressures has that put on leaders today?

Braun: We need to make sure that we prepare our organizations and our leaders for dramatic changes. I’ll share an example from my own industry. In late 2019 and early 2020, I was convinced that the world understood the impact of climate change and the need to focus on the energy transition and invest in better and better-coordinated power systems. But after Covid and the Ukraine war, the center of gravity shifted dramatically, and the climate crisis became less important. Our industry had to react quickly. Things you believe will be true for the next ten years can change within a few months.

The second big topic is artificial intelligence. I’m pretty convinced that AI will do 50 percent of the work we do in HR today in ten years. So what happens to our organizations? Do we need fewer people? Do we need different people? If we need different people, can we train our current people to do what we need? We know there is dramatic change coming that will have a huge impact on how we do our business, but we don’t know exactly what’s coming or when.

Bryant: How do you think about developing leaders to navigate in this fog of uncertainty?

Braun: The best CEOs I’ve worked with were always very good with people. We are now entering an era where actual knowledge about the products you make is becoming less important, and that’s why we need such a strong emphasis on leadership. When they are asked, “How do you lead?” the best leaders will answer, “It depends on the person I’m working with.”

Reimer: What were important early influences for you?

Braun: My parents were both pharmacists and had their own pharmacy, so work was never over. My father always said, “Work is done when it’s done.” So, I never saw work as something bad. It was always about enjoying the work and having fun.

And I was never focused on getting a particular title. What was always driving me was wanting to learn something new and have fun. I also often took on jobs that were particularly challenging, with people thinking I was crazy to sign up for them. For example, in 2003, I was offered the role of HR leader for a factory that was supposed to be closed. I thought, “That is for sure a tough job, but what a great experience.”

I also learned early on that it was important to be able to say no. In these jobs, work is never over, and you just have to go home at a certain point and do something different. These jobs can consume you. You can think 24 hours a day about the problems you have. So you need to consciously decide what your priorities are and what you are going to let go.

I’m not saying that this is easy. I learned it the hard way. Back in 2008, I was burned out, and I had to adjust how I worked. Fundamentally, in my view, it comes down to three things. One is fitness. The fitter you are, the longer you can concentrate and the less tired you get. Nutrition is another

important pillar because what, when, and how much you eat will have a significant influence on your performance. The third pillar is relaxation. And it's not just about taking vacations. You need quality sleep every night.

Fitness, nutrition, and relaxation. If you get these three things right, I think you have a fairly good chance of succeeding. And another important dimension is the culture of the company you work for. That has a massive impact on your performance and how much you enjoy your work.

Bryant: Any important mentoring advice that you heard early on that had a big impact on you?

Braun: I think about the advice one of my bosses gave me many years ago when I was based in Shanghai. I had a day in the office where everything went wrong. The meetings were terrible, and there were only problems and no solutions. As I was heading out at the end of the day, my boss could tell that something was wrong, and he called me into his office. I told him about the bad day and said I was fed up.

He looked at me, smiled, and said, "I recommend that you go home, drink a good glass of red wine with your wife, and be happy that there are problems. Because I can tell you that if there are no problems, then there is no job. I only need you for the problems. I don't need you for the easy stuff."

That has helped me tremendously over the years because I realize that I'm here to resolve problems. And that's what I tell my team: "Let's be clear why we are coming to the office. It's good that we have the problems."