



A New Acronym And Challenge For HR: NAW, Which Means “Noise and Wellbeing”

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Kaleen Love, chief human resources officer at Philip Morris International, shares her key leadership lessons, including insights on workplace wellbeing and productivity, in this Strategic CHRO interview with The ExCo Group CEO David Reimer and Senior Managing Director and Partner Adam Bryant.

Reimer: What issues are top of mind for you as you look out at the HR landscape?

Love: I’ve got a new acronym—NAW—that stands for noise and wellbeing. Noise is about the cacophony of the current external world. That poses a challenge for us to create a workplace that can be a calm oasis for meaningful conversation, civil discourse, learning, and listening to people who have different backgrounds. In these roles, we have the privilege to create workplaces that allow people to do their best work and to be their best selves.

Bryant: How do you do that?

Love: Three things. First, it has to start at the top. The role-modeling is essential, with leaders who demonstrate listening, who don’t talk over others in meetings, who invite others to speak—“I haven’t heard from so-and-so yet. What do you think?”

Another pillar is understanding symbols and symbolism. For example, if you let jerks operate without

repercussions, you're going to have trouble convincing people that you want a respectful, civil workplace. You can't let that behavior slide without acting on it, even if the person is performing well, because everyone else notices. It can take courage to push all managers to understand that and act on it with their people.

Finally, it's essential that we continue to bring different voices to the table so that we are building teams with diverse perspectives. We need to make sure that people from different backgrounds have the onboarding they need to support them and to provide the tools to do their jobs well.

Reimer: What was your career path that led you to this role?

Love: I didn't grow up in HR. In my twenties, I was a social scientist. My master's and my doctorate were in international development, with a focus on how you change cultures, societies, and systems. It was about systemic-level change.

In my late twenties, I had a few key moments that made me think that I needed to pivot to something that was more about making change happen rather than theorizing about it. So I pivoted to McKinsey, where my focus shifted from changing culture and society to changing companies. It was really leaning into business strategy and how you make change happen within a company. You've got to have a vision, data, and analytics, but at the end of the day you're still mobilizing people and mobilizing energy for change to do a new thing.

The other big chapter was at Capital One, where I had a number of wonderful roles. My last role there was in audit where I led a team of data analysts and data scientists and product experts and tech engineers to figure out how we could do audit differently. The common element was finding a new approach.

So, I went from "I'm going to change the world" to "Maybe just this company" to "Maybe just this function in this company." All those lessons taught me that change is hard and that there are core principles about humanity that come out in every environment. I love the ability in this role to impact people at scale.

Bryant: The CHRO role is a tough job. What important early influences in your life prepared you for this challenging job?

Love: I grew up in Indonesia. We moved there when I was five and quickly learned the language. Everything I know about inclusion, diversity, belonging, and cultural differences I learned at age five. I was like a little anthropologist because I was always thinking, "How am I different from you? What makes you different?" I was very conscious of skin color. I was very conscious of economic haves and have nots, and different religions, from a very young age. What made people different? What do we have in common?

So I never really felt like I belonged anywhere. When we moved back to the U.S., I felt like a fish out of water. I may have looked like a lot of Americans, but I didn't think like them or feel like them. That absolutely informed and leads me to my passion for creating a workplace where people can feel a sense of belonging and can be different, look different, have different backgrounds and can find ways of connecting.

Another big thread that has helped me manage a tough job was coming out later in life. I was in my twenties and at Oxford University. I was raised as a Christian missionary kid in a very strong religious

environment. I had loving parents but it was clear to them what was right and wrong. I wrestled with my faith. I wrestled with my community. It took me three or four years, but I finally came to a point where—and I say this bluntly but truthfully—it was either die or live as me. The world felt very dark, and my future looked very dark.

Finally, I said, “I want to live. But if I’m going to live, then here’s who I am. And I’m going to bring that truth to the world.” So, I came out to my family. It took some time for them to accept. It taught me to know yourself, know your values, and live with truth and grace. We can’t not be true to ourselves. It goes back to this idea of people bringing their best self to work. I’m so conscious of the fact that everyone’s got stuff. I had stuff. I lived that stuff, and I hid that stuff.

I was lucky enough to be able to choose joy and life and truth. I want to make sure I can help others do that, as well. Coming out taught me a lot about empathy and what people have that we might not see. It also taught me resilience—knowing what you stand for and being able to come back to that and say, “This is who I am. These are my values, and they have to anchor me. I need to be authentic and real.”

The last big thing that helps me do my job today is that I became a mom to my beautiful girls. I know everyone loves their kids. I always tell people who are about to have kids, “You’ll feel love that you’ve never felt before but you’ll also feel fear that you’ve never felt before, because the fear you feel for your kids is bigger than anything else.” And so, because of this great love for my children and this great fear for them, everything else is just work.

Reimer: And these jobs keep getting harder—exponentially so just in the last few years. Can you talk a bit more about how you persevere through all the challenges?

Love: I source my soul from beauty. That’s a very dramatic statement, I know. But I was thinking about leadership when I went back to a few poems that I love. One of my favorites is “Tell me a story,” by Robert Penn Warren, which reads in part: “Tell me a story. In this century, and moment, of mania. Tell me a story. Make it a story of great distances, and starlight. Make it a story of deep delight.”

It’s a crazy, hectic world. It is exhausting and it is stressful. And I have very intentionally sourced my soul from beauty and story. I’ve taught my kids that when we have a beautiful sunset, someone needs to scream “Look at the sky!” and we all run out and look at it together. Being intentional about finding beauty in the world around me and in the people around me is important.