



# “There Isn’t A Playbook For This Moment”

January 9, 2025

***Teuila Hanson, Chief People Officer at LinkedIn, shares her insights on AI’s impact on HR, leadership innovation, and rethinking workplace strategies in this Strategic CHRO interview with The ExCo Group CEO David Reimer and Senior Managing Director and Partner Adam Bryant.***

Reimer: What do you see as a top-of-mind issue for HR these days?

Hanson: It’s hard not to talk about AI. My view is that there’s so much excitement and enthusiasm around AI, as there should be, but there’s not enough excitement and enthusiasm around the role of humans when it comes to AI. It feels like the conversation is either about machines or humans. At the end of the day, humans are the ones who need to adopt and embrace AI so they can then focus on doing human things like being creative and collaborative. It also means people can bring all their creativity to work—including skills that have not been immediately relevant to their particular role—because a lot of mundane or repeatable tasks are no longer part of their work. What does that open up in terms of possibilities?

AI is also giving us the opportunity to revisit those areas of HR that we’ve just accepted as status quo in the past. Now, we have the opportunity to do things differently. For example, a lot of people are not excited about performance management and annual reviews. There’s always a bit of dread associated with the process. But perhaps that can be replaced with more immediate feedback

through AI rather than waiting for those usual cycles.

It's a challenge because it's so vague and ambiguous—how do you get your arms around these things, and how do you innovate? For me, there's just a lot of optimism if you have people who are energized by change and see this technology as an opportunity to bust through the status quo. If AI can help people do a lot of their work faster, that, in theory, creates a lot of free time. So, how do you, as a leader, inspire people to think of ways to use that free time to innovate and collaborate?

Bryant: It is an opportunity, but also a leadership challenge. What is the role of leaders in all this?

Hanson: Leaders need to see themselves as change leaders right now. Rather than looking at your book of business simply through the lens of productivity and efficiency, you need to be creating a list of what you can change and innovate. Every leader probably has a list of things they wish they could do if they had additional resources. But it can be hard to dream big because people get tied down to the mundane. This is the moment to make your wish list. It's not just an efficiency exercise. It's about bringing more value and joy to work.

Reimer: What has changed, and what has not changed, for CHROs in recent years?

Hanson: I'll start with what has remained constant, which is being the voice in the room who thinks about the employee experience. You're the one who raises your hand to say, "Let's really think about how this is going to land with our employees," or to raise the question about how much change you can drive at once, because change exhaustion is real.

What has changed is that there isn't a playbook for this moment. For CHROs, it's about getting comfortable with sprinting and pivoting. Traditionally, this role has been a conventional role and a risk-averse role. It's been the role that's sort of the "steady Eddy" on the executive team. This is a moment of being unconventional. You're experimenting, you're using design thinking, you need to sprint and pivot. That's a different muscle.

For HR, it means understanding what is a smart risk. It means holding off on saying "no" as much as you can in conversations. People often assume they are going to hear no when they go to HR. So with my team, I tell them, let's not start with no. What if this new idea is the only choice we had? How would we make it work so that we could sleep well at night knowing that we've done our jobs from a risk mitigation perspective but we're also helping LinkedIn win? It's a muscle that you want to build.

Bryant: What were early influences that shaped who you are today?

Hanson: My mom was born in Samoa, and she came to the United States when she was in her twenties. She was a banker and went on to become an executive at a bank here in San Francisco. I was always really fascinated with the fact that she left her family to come to the United States and pursue a career. That must have been so uncomfortable and scary, but she wanted a different life and new opportunities. Because I had this role model of my mother, I formed a belief early on that I could do anything.

Reimer: What do you see as the biggest leadership challenge for senior executives these days?

Hanson: It's self-awareness and how leaders are showing up. Yes, leaders must have technical acumen and understand how to drive results, but it's really important for them to understand how they are showing up and inspiring and motivating their workforce. Even if they don't have all the answers,

they need to bring energy and show confidence and stability. The skill and ability to be self-aware is so critical but it is still often overlooked.

Bryant: What's the best leadership lesson you learned from one of your worst managers?

Hanson: I worked for a really tough senior lawyer in my early law firm days—the type of person who made your stomach turn inside-out before you went into their office. Early in my time there, I gave her a research project that wasn't very good. She turned to me and said, "If you're going to make it here, you need to justify your existence." My heart just sank. To her, it was just about how much I could bill.

But there was a silver lining because the lesson that I got, in a very brutal way, was to understand that when you're in business, you can't forget that there are outcomes that you're trying to drive. It is something I keep in the back of my mind, though in a much more productive way. And when someone on my team comes up with an idea, I always want to know how it's tied to our core metrics and how it will help drive business outcomes.

Reimer: How do you hire? What questions do you ask in job interviews?

Hanson: I'm trying to learn how resourceful the person is and whether they have the hustle mentality. In my role, I'm hiring vice presidents. I'm less interested in the big new program they launched in their organization with a budget of a couple of million dollars. I'm much more interested in how, even when they had zero budget, they were able to make magic happen in the organization.

That speaks to how they can influence others and drive change. Were they able to tell their team or convince other teams to stop doing something to free up resources for a new initiative? When you find someone who can do that, particularly in a low-margin business, you better hire them because that person is going to be your go-to employee who will, through hustle and grind, find a way to make things happen. Those are your future leaders. They will be part of your succession plans. Those are the people who can get stuff done and not take no for an answer.