



CHROs Must Never Forget That They Are The Voice Of The People On The C-Suite Team

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Ellyn Shook, the former CHRO at Accenture, shares her key leadership lessons and thoughts on leveraging generative AI in this Strategic CHRO interview with Adam Bryant of The ExCo Group and World 50 Group in this “Passing the Baton” series.

Q. What do you see as the X-factors that are going to separate the CHROs of the future?

A. First and foremost, the CHRO needs to always remember that they play a very special role on the C-suite team, because they are the voice of the people. As issues get discussed, they always have to bring to the table what’s on the minds and in the hearts of people, because organizations cannot grow and thrive and be successful without their people. When you first get to that table, you may forget that. You want to be one of the crowd, but you can’t forget your role and responsibility.

Second, is what I call the five C’s—the things that never changed in importance during the decade I was in the role. The first is compassion. It goes beyond empathy. Compassion is about having the courage to act on the empathy, which isn’t always easy to do.

Second is competence. Directors and the rest of the leadership team are looking to the CHRO to have deep competence in a wide variety of areas, and you have to demonstrate that time and time again. Given the complexity of the role, that requires you to keep learning every day.

The third is collaboration. Technology can help bring down a lot of organizational silos, but the X-factor is when organizations collaborate beyond their own walls and form partnerships with other organizations—NGOs, academia, other companies—to really accelerate the pace of change.

Fourth is context. You have to be fully aware of the context of the world at the moment and how you're going to operate within that context. Last is confidence. What CHROs do is very hard, and you've got to be able to demonstrate confidence because people, during good times and difficult times, are going to look to you to show confidence. Your confidence is going to be shaken at different times, and that's okay. Talk to your friends about that, but make sure you're role-modeling confidence to your organization.

The last X-factor I see is about leveraging generative AI, data and tech. To maximize your productivity growth from AI, you have to invest in your people. The CHRO has a big role to play to capture this top line productivity by figuring out how to architect the work and reskill people to bring everybody along.

Q. What is it about your background, even going back to your childhood, that built your resilience and drive to navigate all the overwhelming challenges that CHROs face every day?

A. This may seem like a tangent, but I'm going to share a story of what happened to me in seventh grade, because someone out there might have had a similar experience. My math teacher, in front of my whole class, told me I was stupid. It crushed me. My parents were public school educators—my mom was a teacher and my dad was superintendent of schools. My parents got me a tutor, but I just believed that I was stupid, and I spent the rest of my academic life figuring out a path where I wouldn't have to take a math class.

Fast forward to the year 2000. I was working at Andersen Consulting. A partner named Jon Conahan tapped me on the shoulder to work on Andersen's IPO, and our job was to figure out how to distribute the equity to all our people. I called my dad, and I said, "What do I do? I'm not qualified for this." He said, "Ellyn, just go and do it. You're going to learn something."

I remember being in a conference room with Jon, who was probably one of the smartest people I'd ever met. I was up at the board working on some math equations, and he stopped me and asked, "Were you a calculus major in college?" Honestly, just those few words changed the course of my life, personally and professionally, because he gave me confidence that I could do anything. A lesson from that experience is that words—harsh words and kind words—do matter.

My parents also taught my two sisters and me grit. We didn't have a lot of money. We had to do a lot of things for ourselves. My dad pushed us. He kept resetting the bar, which was both annoying and hard on our self-esteem, because we never felt like we reached anything. I was always trying to figure out how to get better and do things better.

Trying to solve all the Rubik's cubes that show up on your desk every day, for me, is about caring deeply for our people. Every single day, I wanted to make sure this was the place where they could grow and develop their careers and provide for their families.

I vividly remember the moment I finally understood what my purpose is in this role. I was at a dinner for Fortune's Most Powerful Women. The speaker was Courtney Banghart, who was the coach at the time for Princeton's women's basketball team. She started talking about her dad, and shared what he said to her when she was 12. "Courtney, you need to remember to lift as you rise." That became my purpose. That is what I wake up every single day to do—to lift as I rise.