



Make Sure You Invest Enough Time In Your Team To Help Them Be Successful

April 1, 2025

Cara Chennault-Reid, vice president of human resources at Koch Inc., shares her key leadership lessons on business-first HR leadership, curiosity, courage, and preparing for the future of work with Adam Bryant of The ExCo Group and World 50 Group in this “Passing the Baton” series.

Q. When you think about the skills and capabilities that future HR leaders are going to need, what rises to the top?

A. What business leaders expect from HR partners today is different. Historically, people with HR backgrounds have moved into the CHRO roles. But we’re now seeing a lot of success with people coming into HR from different disciplines.

Business leaders value somebody who can connect and understand how the business works, its vision and priorities, and the challenges it potentially faces. Knowledge and experience in how profitability affects the business—how it makes and loses money—along with the intellectual capacity to work alongside leaders, make the HR partner a critical part of the business team.

In the past, we’ve led with our HR expertise, but now we have to be trusted and credible business leaders first. That requires all of us to be lifelong learners and to have a natural curiosity about how things work and how they all fit together. You also need the intellectual horsepower to understand

what business leaders are trying to do and how to develop people and motivate them to contribute toward achieving those goals.

Finally, I'll mention the importance of courage. You need to have the courage to be able to raise your hand and challenge a decision or assumption. At the same time, it takes a tremendous amount of humility to recognize and admit what you don't know and then seek help to fill in those gaps. The connection between the two—courage and humility—means you also must be willing to be vulnerable sometimes.

Q. The CHRO role has always been difficult, but it has become exponentially harder in the last few years. What is it about your background that makes you able to thrive in this job?

A. For me, it's that natural curiosity that I mentioned earlier. I started in manufacturing, and I always wanted to understand how things worked and what impacted our overall profitability, margins, etc. And, of course, how we made money.

The desire to know how things work and why has often left me feeling like a kid who asks all the "why" questions. The want to learn is innate to who I am as a person, and it has really enabled me to have varied experiences throughout my career.

My family would also tell you that I get bored easily. I'm driven to continue improving myself, improving those around me, and contributing. If you think about the self-actualizing journey that we all go through, what motivates me is the opportunity to learn and contribute.

If you like change, this is the right role. You never know what's coming. There's never a day that feels like a rinse and repeat. With all the industries we're in and how things are evolving, those days just don't exist, and that fuels my fire.

Q. With all the big issues on the horizon for HR, what's top of mind for you these days?

A. We, as an organization, really embraced AI and created teams to get ahead of it. At first, the market would say that AI was going to replace all jobs, but we've seen the pendulum swing, and now we think of AI as a powerful resource that is enabling versus replacing.

We are continually asking ourselves where we can leverage AI to help us with insights about the organization and the market. How can we translate what is happening and model what may happen? That's what we've been focusing on more. That and, of course, the workforce and skills that will be needed in the future of work, and how we prepare for those changes.

Q. What are your top dos and don'ts for first-time CHROs?

A. Bring your whole self to work every single day and make sure the work you're doing aligns with your passions. You really can't step into this job and make it if that's not who you are at your core. Carve out time and invest in getting to know your business and how it works. Get to know the leaders, understand how the business operates, and learn its ins and outs. Recognize where you may have gaps and work to fill them.

Don't be afraid to acknowledge what you don't know. Don't try to "fake it 'til you make it." You'll be a lot better off being honest, recognizing what you don't know, and getting help. That has been key for me—seeking out help from people who can and want to help me close any gaps.

The last thing I would say is, don't be afraid of change. It's going to happen either way— you're either going to help drive it or it's going to happen to you. Be comfortable in the uncomfortable.

Q. What do you consider the hardest part of leadership?

A. I'll start by saying that the people who are most successful in leadership roles are those who really get to know the people around them. We've done a lot of work to communicate the idea that not everybody needs to be a leader of people. It's okay if they would rather focus on their area of expertise, rather than leading others. We need to provide the space and paths for giving people upward mobility and fulfillment without having to move into leadership roles.

Really knowing yourself comes first. Then, recognize that if you really want to be a supervisor, you must have the desire to invest in people and help make them better. If that's not you, find a better path that fits your passions. Because if you are a supervisor but you really don't like getting to know the people on your team and spending time with them, it will become obvious quickly.

Now, back to your initial question—what is the hardest part of leadership? To me, one of the biggest challenges is making sure that you invest enough time in the people around you to help them be successful. You have to meet them where they are, and that gets harder as your team gets bigger. This requires a commitment to knowing them, making space to know them, and having intentional conversations with them about their likes, dislikes, desires, passions, goals, etc.