



Have High Expectations For People, But Also Know When You Have To Bring Them Along

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Stacey Hoin, Chief Human Resources Officer at Guardian Life, shares her key leadership lessons on a skills-forward HR strategy, leading through demographic shifts, and adapting to new technologies in this Strategic CHRO interview with The ExCo Group CEO David Reimer and Senior Managing Director and Partner Adam Bryant.

Reimer: As you scan the horizon, what are some issues that are top of mind for you these days?

Hoin: One is the amazing demographic shift that's going on in the world. We have five generations of colleagues in the workforce at one time now. By 2030, Millennials are going to be leading, and Gen Z will be on the way up. That's a lot to think about in terms of different expectations at work. How do you think about flexibility? How do you think about careers, purpose, family structures, global mobility, and everything else for different generations?

Technology is another, of course. AI and automation are changing how work is getting done. It's not so much about efficiency as it is about demanding a greater focus on how we do these tasks. Who does the task? How do things get done? How do we interface with our customers? The kind of work we're doing is going to change.

When you think about demographic shifts and technology coming together, it creates a real need to focus on skills. We've talked a lot in the HR community about building a more skills-based talent-management strategy. At Guardian, we talk about being "skills forward." That allows us, based on all these changes that are happening, to ask: What are the skills we need? What are the skills we have? Can we develop those skills? Do we need to buy those skills?

The bigger challenge is to create this culture that's really adaptable, where you can shift the kind of skills that you have in order to work in new ways.

Bryant: As AI evolves how companies think about their operating model, how do you think about the leadership implications of those shifts?

Hoin: One issue we've been discussing a lot is, how do you structure intact teams so that they work on a certain problem and, once they solve it, move on to the next problem? That's less about hierarchy and more about the work that you do.

It can be hard to get people aligned to that idea when they're used to a very hierarchical structure. But we're piloting that, creating what we call persistent teams. We're in this period now where we have to try new things. Some are going to work, and some are not going to work, and that's okay.

Reimer: It takes a certain kind of wiring and background to not only survive in your kind of job, but to thrive in it, given all the ambiguity and new challenges you face. Where does that come from for you?

Hoin: From a young age, in my family dynamic, I learned to be resilient and adaptable. I learned to step in and take charge when I needed to. My parents had very high expectations that we would be successful in life. They taught us how to be independent and solve problems on our own.

I also went to law school, and in law school, you learn how to spot issues, to see around corners, and then to problem-solve in a way that hopefully is win-win. That was another big influence on me.

A big part of my career was at GE, and if you didn't learn how to embrace and drive change at GE, you were not going to survive. I learned how to identify my stakeholders and bring them along. I am a driven person. I am a competitive person. I like to win, and I like the company I'm working for to win.

Bryant: You've no doubt done a lot of mentoring and coaching of senior executives over your career. When you think about all those conversations, are there a couple of themes that come up more often than others?

Hoin: One is self-awareness and making sure that people understand how they and their actions are perceived by others. It can be around something simple. For example, sometimes I have to send a quick email, and I don't always include pleasantries, such as "I hope you had a great weekend."

But I know that's really important for a lot of people, so I remind myself not to be in such a hurry and take time to connect with people. Being self-aware about all those little behaviors and how they impact other people is an important thing that leaders often miss because they're so busy.

That leads to the second piece of advice, which is that it's not just about what you do, it's how you do it. In a lot of companies, leaders can get so focused on their goals, such as making sure that the P&L