



As A Leader, You Have To Balance Empathy With The Ability To Make Tough Choices

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Felecia Pryor, Chief People Officer at John Deere, shares her key leadership lessons on civil discourse in the workplace, leading through AI job disruption fears, and fostering resilience during times of uncertainty in this Strategic CHRO interview with The ExCo Group CEO David Reimer and Senior Managing Director and Partner Adam Bryant.

Reimer: What issues or challenges are top-of-mind for you these days?

Pryor: AI is a big one, particularly the challenge of bringing people along on the journey, to have AI be supportive of the work they're going to be doing over the long term. There is a nuance there, because when we talk about AI, many people naturally wonder, "What about me? What's going to happen to my job?"

One approach we are using is to partner with OpenAI on a certification program to help people become more comfortable using AI in their everyday work. And in terms of helping people to see its value, rather than as a threat, it's useful to frame it this way—that it's not about AI taking your job; it's the people who have embraced these agents and become sophisticated in how to use them who are going to take your job.

It's about helping reduce the fear that many employees feel, given all that's happening in the world at large and in an industry like ours, where there are long cycles of high points and downturns. We're

dealing with the evolution of technology and automation, and also the business realities we're facing today.

Bryant: Given all that, how do you try to help create a sense of calm inside your company?

Pryor: There is a lot of uncertainty, anxiety, and impatience. But people are adults, and sometimes it's just about just getting back to the basics of communicating as candidly and as transparently as possible. None of us is living under a rock. We all see everything, externally and internally, that we have to maneuver through.

Communicating candidly, honestly, and transparently gets us all on the same field, knowing what we have to do to deliver every day for our customers. It's so easy to get distracted, and it's so easy to start feeling like a victim. But you can let things happen to you, or you can take control of the things that you can control. We're all working toward the same mission, and if we're focused on those things that we can control, we will be victorious.

Reimer: What is it about your background that sets you up to be able to thrive in a role like yours, with so much ambiguity and endless new challenges?

Pryor: I've never been afraid of change or taking risks. I remember when I was in the seventh grade, I came home from school and told my sister, "I want to run for student class vice president." And she said, "You can do it. Let's get your speech ready, and let's go for it." I've always been energized by the challenge of solving big problems. I've never been one to back off or to shy away from an opportunity to solve a problem.

It all starts with how we were raised. My mom was a single mom. There were four girls, and we didn't have any brothers to stand up for us, so we had to stand up for each other. I've always been practical and yet not afraid to stand up for what I believe in and what I think is right, and to do it in a way that's authentic to who I am.

Bryant: You've worked in different companies, different industries, and different countries. You're clearly comfortable with change. What's your playbook for that?

Pryor: If you're not willing to roll the dice on yourself, who's worth rolling the dice on? I've always rolled the dice on myself. If it works, it works. If it doesn't, it doesn't. And when I make a decision, be a good one or a bad one, I keep moving.

When I'm in a new situation, I always ask a lot of questions in a way that's not threatening to people. When people come into a new organization, a new company, or a new country, they can make the mistake of acting like they are a big shot. But you don't know what you don't know.

The number one thing is getting people to trust you and to know that you have a genuine interest in the problems, the challenges, and wanting to help solve them. People are always looking to see if you are truly genuine.

Reimer: What has changed and continues to change about what good leadership looks like?

Pryor: As a leader, you have to be able to balance a high level of engagement and empathy with not being soft or apologetic about the hard things you have to do. There's a fine point in the middle, but I see a lot of leaders lean too heavily on either side.

Some leaders care only about the hard, quantifiable numbers. And then you have leaders who believe they have to say yes to everything and always be nice to get people to deliver for them. That also doesn't work. You need a balance, with people knowing that you are here to deliver for the company and that you're going to treat people like human beings along the way.

I said it earlier, but it's about communicating with honesty, candor, and transparency. My grandmother used to say that understanding is the greatest thing in the world, because it gives everybody choice.

Bryant: What's been a lasting lesson you learned from one of the worst managers you ever worked for?

Pryor: A leader told me once that I was too nice. It made me reflect on how I was showing up in the workplace. Because I do treat people with the basics of human kindness, dignity, and respect. I'm the type of leader who, if I get on an elevator with you, I'm going to say good morning.

A lot of people don't do that. You might see them three times during the day in the hallways, and they will never look you in the eye. This idea that I was too nice was particularly bad advice. Because I am nice, but that doesn't mean I can't do the hard things. I don't shy away from that.

Reimer: How do you complete the sentence, "The hardest part of leadership is..."?

Pryor: The hardest part of leadership is always having to be selfless. As chief people officers, we are coaching everyone, including the CEO, our peers, and our direct reports. We have to be the office of optimism and hope for the workforce, especially during trying times. You always have to put yourself aside, because you are giving so much of yourself to everything and everyone. But I do make time to do things that make me happy, because that's how I'm a better person and a better leader.

You have to stay grounded about the role and that you are there to help others. Because as leaders, everybody's catering to you, and it can turn you into a person who thinks that your highest priority is you. If I want water, somebody will bring it to me. If I want to order lunch, somebody will get it. There's somebody to drive me. It can be easy to lose yourself in all of this. You have to remember that you're not bigger than the mission of helping others, but you also have to take care of yourself, as well.