



# Given All The Ambiguity Right Now, A Key Role For Leaders Is To Provide A Sense Of Calm

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**Tristram Roberts, Group HR Director of Barclays, joined The ExCo Group's David Reimer and Adam Bryant to discuss how organizations can begin to truly embrace AI, the leader's responsibility to provide a sense of calm, and the importance of staying dispassionate by focusing on solving challenges rather than denying or defending them.**

**Reimer: What issues and challenges are top of mind for you these days?**

**Roberts:** The first is, how do you get an organization to truly start to embrace AI? There are, of course, questions about the impact of AI on productivity. How real is it? How overhyped has it been? What are some of the barriers? But the bigger question is, how are we going to order things and actually run an organization in the age of agentic AI and digital workers?

Imagine a large organization with no hiring standards, no hiring controls, and no organizational design, where everyone's allowed to create their own agentic AI. That doesn't feel like productivity. That feels like chaos. So how do we start thinking about that while not getting in the way of the benefits of all this technology?

A related point is, given the acceleration of AI and the nature of knowledge work, how are we going to train our junior workers? If you listen to some of the commentators, junior workers become totally redundant, which, of course, sounds fantastic if you're solely focused on cost-cutting. But then, 10

years later, you've got no one to do the actual work.

So how do we run a training program for them that is granular and real? For most of us in our careers, most of what we learned came from doing the work itself and often messing up. We need to find solutions that are going to be contextual within our own organizations.

The other thing I spend a lot of time thinking about is how you reduce friction in organizations. How do you actually make organizations effective? When you've worked, like I have, in large multinational organizations for your entire career, you get used to the "tax" that you have to pay to get things done. But as we now move into the pace of AI and the competitive environment, getting rid of as much of that as possible is going to be absolutely critical.

**Bryant: How does leadership have to keep evolving to do everything you just described?**

**Roberts:** Leading a workforce is super difficult in this environment. I'm sure most organizations have large swaths of workers who are worried about the future. They're worried about whether they have a job. And if they have a job, what does it look like? What skills are going to be required to be able to learn?

You've got a high degree of ambiguity, and so the first stage of leadership is providing a sense of calm for people. If everyone's running around scared, that's not a solid foundation for building anything. That requires leadership with a high degree of empathy, humanity, and clarity to get adoption and utilization of new technologies.

We held a town hall recently for the HR function. This topic of AI, of course, came up. People understandably have questions. The central message we conveyed is that you've got to start future-proofing yourself by becoming familiar with the tools and trying use cases.

The variance among people is incredible in terms of their level of comfort or ability to do that. The deeply curious just dive right in. They're self-starters. You've got some who just refuse to use it. And there is, of course, the hump in the middle of your normal distribution where you have a chance to create a lot of impact.

Trying to move that majority requires clarity of expectation, support, and really prompting a different type of behavior. It's about building the curiosity that's going to be required to think about something in new ways. Quite frankly, there are many parallels to the pandemic. We were all making it up as we went along. There was no playbook. We were all trying to do the right thing within the context of our own organizations and our own realities.

A key capability for that is fostering among senior leaders a curiosity to go after some of these challenges and give them the license to start thinking, almost in an abstract way, about how to do these things. Some of the solutions are not going to come from conventional thinking. We have to foster curiosity to start to develop hypotheses.

We need to find time for that, which doesn't happen organically. It's got to be deliberate. We talk here about protecting time and resources for things that are not yet defined. There's got to be some ring-fencing, certainly from a time perspective, to make that a reality.

**Reimer: You're an accountant by training, but there are rarely tidy solutions in your current role. What is it in your background that allows you to be comfortable with a high degree of ambiguity?**

**Roberts:** There's a bit of an analogy for this role to how governments operate, in that the number of levers you can pull are relatively limited, and the impact of them play out over many years. You're trying to help steer and support an organization through a very uncertain future while doing that with 100,000 employees.

It's a privileged seat to be in, and the difficulty of the role is just a given. What helps me, without going into some deep and dark places, is that I did not have a smooth childhood. So I've got a reasonable degree of resilience, having weathered lots of uncertainty and personal challenges.

And I do find my accounting background very helpful, in that it has required me to build the skill of creating mental models for navigating different challenges. Many challenges today feel like an equation with only variables. And so, to create a constant, I'll create a mental model that I can then fit the variables into and see if I can find a path to a solution.

Sometimes that's successful. Sometimes it's the wrong mental model, and then I'll come up with a different one. I'm wired to create logical constructs and then test whether they are applicable, and then start over if they don't work.

**Bryant: Resilience can be a double-edged sword, because it can be hard to reach out for help when you've learned to rely just on yourself to get out of tough spots.**

**Roberts:** Yes, but there were fundamental lessons I've learned in my career that helped me try to be better at this. For most of my career, I was an expert in a variety of technical topics. My identity was being the person in the room who knew the most about a particular topic.

The first big career lesson was when I moved to being a generalist, and I was asking myself, why on earth am I in the room? What possible value can I add here? I learned that I had to suddenly become the conductor of the orchestra, rather than a musician.

The second one was recognizing that, even though we all take immense pride in our work and want our functional part of the business to be fantastic, the reality is that every single day there are going to be problems somewhere. Something is always going wrong.

So I had to learn how to be more dispassionate. If something went wrong within the function or within the firm that was my responsibility, I had to focus on fixing it rather than getting caught up in trying to deny or defend it. Because that reaction, quite frankly, is just a waste of time. You have to just focus on fixing things.

The third lesson was specifically about resilience. For me, my definition early on was that I was able to keep going. I was absolutely wired that way until I fell asleep at midday on a Saturday while I was driving on the highway and had a crash. I woke up just before it got pretty bad and managed to slam on the brakes, but it made me realize that I can't keep doing this. That was a wake-up call for me about the fact that I wasn't superhuman.

The other part was me becoming more comfortable over time, after I had built up a track record in the job, of being willing to say that I haven't got the answers, and saying those words in a genuine way. You get to a point where, quite frankly, the problems are too difficult and you need to crowdsource solutions.