



The Leaders Of The Future Have To Recognize That They Don't Have All The Answers

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Jennifer Centrone, CHRO of Arch Capital Services, talks the evolution of AI, long term strategies through market shifts, and shared her key leadership lessons with David Reimer, CEO of The ExCo Group, and Adam Bryant in our latest Strategic CHRO interview.

Reimer. What issues are top of mind for you these days?

Centrone: AI is impacting everybody, of course, and it's happening really fast. We've been using predictive and strategic analytics for some time now, but the capabilities of AI are changing quickly. We're partnering with our strategy and innovation group and our full Executive Leadership Team on this. We're sorting through where we're going to pick our spots as part of our 2030 strategy.

Another one for us is leadership development in a changing world. For us, the leaders of the future have to recognize that they don't have all the answers, particularly because the new generations coming into the workforce are much more technologically savvy. We're also seeing generations stay in the workforce longer.

Leaders have to be ready to take on wider spans on control, given the impact of AI and how work is changing. They've got to figure out how to leverage the benefits of everything that each generation is bringing to the workplace. That's a lot to ask of leaders, and they're going to have to be really flexible

and nimble. They've got to be curious and willing to learn so they can help lead teams in a positive and effective way.

Bryant: We are hearing more companies that, like yours, are developing 2030 strategies. And yet it can feel difficult to see beyond the next few months. How do you think about long-term planning amid all the uncertainty?

Centrone: When you take a giant step back, you have to be able as a company to define the big, important things that are going to move your business forward. If you don't, everybody's going to be scattered, working on a lot of things and not having an impact. So it's important for a 2030 strategy to have key areas of focus for people to rally around.

But within each of those areas, we're always going to be very flexible and nimble about how we adjust based on changing market conditions, changing technologies, and things that we learn along the way. We're not going to have people march to a 2030 strategy and then miss what's in our peripheral vision.

Reimer: What do you consider to be the hardest part of leadership?

Centrone: As a CHRO, you have to be a truth teller. It's not always easy. But if you're genuinely trying to help people move forward in their careers, you have to be able to have difficult conversations to help them navigate the complexities of their own worlds. You have to be open and honest with people in a way that they hopefully can hear things.

Bryant: And on that point, do you have ways to disarm people so they actually hear the feedback you're giving them?

Centrone: Asking questions can be effective, including saying, "Are you open to hearing some feedback that I think might be helpful?" Or you can ask people if that's the way they really wanted to show up in a meeting, to pick one example. The point is to ask permission to give them feedback and then have them agree to being open to hear it.

If you're genuinely trying to help somebody get better and stronger at whatever it is they're working on, I think you can find the right words to help somebody in those conversations.

Reimer: You're obviously comfortable dealing with all the ambiguity and pressures of a role like yours. Where does that come from?

Centrone: I am very comfortable with change. I was the middle child of three, and we lived in South Windsor, Conn., in a very small home with one garage and one bathroom. We did not have much money, and we had even less over time because of my father's love of gambling, which eventually took over our lives. That made the home situation very unstable.

So growing up was very unpredictable for me, and my mom wasn't quite sure how to handle it all. So from a very early age, I took on a leadership role in the family, helping my mom balance her checkbook, buy groceries, and make dinners. I felt a lot of pride in helping her with that. Thankfully she divorced my father, which took a huge amount of courage.

She was a dental assistant making \$22,000 a year, and we had a double mortgage on our house and literally no savings. So I knew from an early age that if I wanted to make something happen for

myself, it was going to have to be by continuing to work very hard on my own. I worked four jobs every summer to pay my way through college, and balanced being a Division 1 field hockey athlete with everything else. So that resilience and ability to adapt to change has always been with me.

After I graduated, I worked at Accenture as a change-management consultant. You're given a lot of leadership responsibility early in your career there, and you learn to adapt and move into different industries and cultures. You have to figure out what problem they're trying to solve and build new relationships quickly to have an impact. All those things helped prepare me to be able to flex in a changing world.

Bryant: Resilience can be a double-edged sword. It's good for all the obvious reasons, but the downside of it is that it can make leaders reluctant to ask for help, because they are used to relying only on themselves to get out of tough spots. Does that resonate for you?

Centrone: That's something I'm working on. There are moments when you don't even think of asking for help because you just automatically think that it's up to you to take care of it. I'm learning how to ask for help over time, but it's still very much a work in progress.

That said, playing field hockey in college was a big influence. I love team sports. Everyone's got a position to play and you've got to work together to win. It's the same on executive leadership teams. No leader should try to run all the plays themselves, as we all have blind spots. No one knows how to play all the positions, either. So at some point you have to ask for help or pass the ball because then you get to a better outcome.

Reimer: How do you hire? What questions do you ask in job interviews?

Centrone: A couple of questions I really like are, what are you most proud of in terms of what you've accomplished? Their answer says a lot about what the person actually cares about, both professionally and personally. Was it their own individual contribution, or was it about a team?

I also like to ask them to share a time when they've disagreed with a senior leader and how they coached that along. That tells me about how they're able to influence people, because your job all day long is to influence people. Were they able to shift the outcome of that conversation?

Bryant: What's the most impactful leadership lesson that you took away from maybe the worst manager you ever worked for?

Centrone: I've really tried to learn from every leader I've had, including what was good about their approach and also recognizing that everyone has shortfalls, myself included. If I had listened to everyone along the way, I probably wouldn't be in the role I'm in. You've got to decide for yourself what you want and then go get it.